

INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

HAVING BEEN chained to the Black Library signing area at the last four UK Games Days I was pleasantly surprised when I attended the recent Games Day in Canada (so recent, I'm still jetlagged as I type this). Aside from the stunning venue – the Metro Toronto Convention Center – what really impressed me was how friendly and knowledgeable all the Black Library fans were.

Ben Counter and Graham McNeill did an absolutely sterling job meeting and greeting convention goers all day long and Ben's reading from *Grey Knights* was so good that I swear the temperature dropped by a couple of degrees in the seminar room! I'll never forget the look on his face when one guy started putting all his converted Soul Drinker Marines on the table – including a bang-on Sarpedon – and then spent the next ten minutes gushing about how much he loves the Soul Drinkers novels.

It's sometimes easy to forget when you're sitting in an office in Nottingham putting together a brief for a piece of cover artwork or thrashing away at a word processor in

North London killing demons that the finished product is literally going to all four corners of the globe. It's really brought home to you though when you start browsing the Golden Demon entries and see all the Darkblades, Ephrael Sterns and Hellbrandt Grimms or wander around a few display games and witness a squad of Tanith assaulting a Blood Pact position.

Thanks to Graham and Ben for being so fantastic and patient and to everybody who made it down to Games Day. It's seeing a hall full of enthusiastic readers and gamers that makes this job so worthwhile.

A BIT OF A treat for you this issue. To coincide with the release of THQ's awesome new computer game *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* we have an exclusive tie-in short story written by the sensationally named Lucien Soulban. Lucien knows his stuff when it comes to *Dawn of War*, he was one of the team who helped develop the game and actually wrote the in-game storyline.

White Dwarfer Nick Kyme makes a welcome

return to these pages with a tale of the Knights of Morr. Expect a high bodycount from this one. And speaking of high bodycounts, *Engage the Enemy* is a Space Wolf story so savage that it took two writers to contain it. Welcome aboard Jeff and Harry.

Robert Earl is another author adding to his Inferno! repertoire this issue with *Rattenkrieg*, a skaven story with one of the best twists in a long while.

And if you haven't already skipped reading the rest of this editorial to dive in and start reading the stories then you'll be pleased to hear that Marijan von Staufer has contributed an addendum to the fantastic Liber Chaotica series with a treatise on magic in the old world. Warning: the Black Library accepts no responsibility for any transfigurations or energy bolts that may occur as a result of reading this article.

See you in two months' time.



Christian Dunn
Editor

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The planet of Cyrene is being purged of all Chaos taint by the might of the vengeful Imperium. The Blood Ravens Space Marines are aiding with the scourge, but Captain Gabriel Angelos is driven to perform another important mission, even if it means going against the orders of the Ordo Malleus.

Story *Lucien Soulban* • Illustration Courtesy of THQ

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The skaven crawl in every sewer in the Empire, and they are becoming bolder by the year, even stealing children from their beds. A keeper of a shrine of Morr hears a terrible tale, on a cold and windy night, from a warrior dead set on a path to doom, on his way to the final battle in the rattenkrieg!

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The mighty Space Wolves are tasked with the destruction of invading Iron Warriors during the 13th Black Crusade. Upon planet fall they set about their task, only to find that their job is already being done. Who are these men who are taking the forces of Chaos apart?

Story *Jeff Smith & Hary Heckel* • Illustration *John Cadice*

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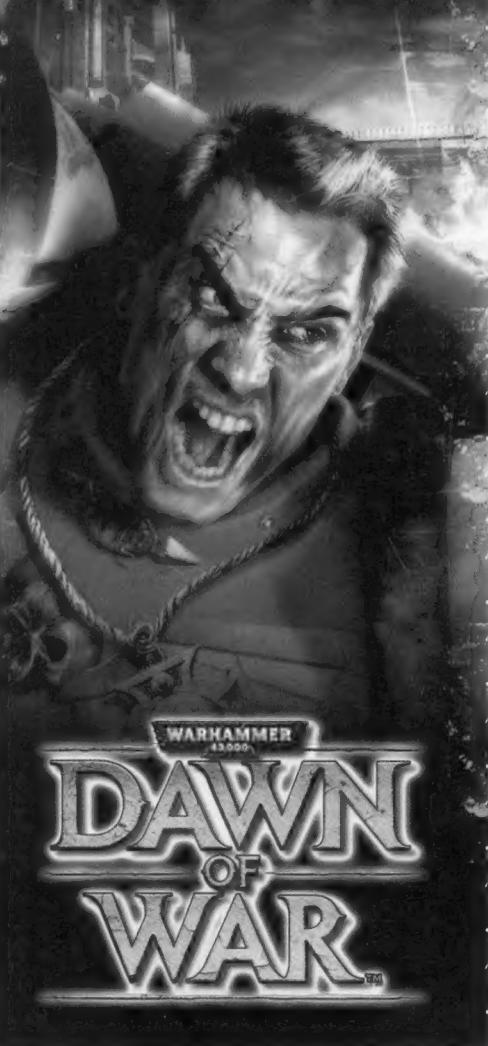
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ALTAR OF CYRENE

By Lucien Soulban



PLUMES OF DUST rained across Cyrene, the sky unable to shed tears any longer. A layer of fine debris filled the stratosphere and sent slow-drifting columns of suffocating ash down on the planet's surface. Occasionally, the storm thundered at the touch of orbital mass-driver rounds that rippled the cinder clouds and shattered the ground. The projectiles were fashioned to look like ten tonne metallic statues of the Emperor. Each bomb sent more dust and fire-borne ash into the heavens. Each bomb was an exclamation point in the litany against heresy and another hammer fall in the Exterminatus and destruction absolute of Cyrene's every living citizen. Chaos had a foothold, but the might of the Imperium was busy kicking it loose, and using the final death throes of the planet as an example for all who might falter.

The black fleet of the Adeptus Astartes orbited Cyrene, raining down the will of the Ordo Malleus. No unsanctioned craft could pass through the debris cloud, although escape vessels occasionally breached the canopy of dust, before falling back under the blistering fire of the blockade. Hulls blackened and tongues of flame spat through ruptured seams as the ships careened back to the planet, adding to the confusion. Only the fleet's Thunderhawks and dropships earned free passage, ferrying the wounded and bringing fresh forces into the fray.

And far below the stationary fleet, Cyrene rotated slowly, bringing city after city to bear under the attack.



THE THUNDER WAS still distant, but the ground shook with the erratic pulse of the fleet's pounding march across the face of the world. Cyrene quivered under the vengeful boot of the Ordo Malleus. If the white haired Captain Gabriel Angelos of the Blood Ravens felt the approaching doom, he ignored it for more

pressing concerns. A door shattered under the heel of his thick boot. He could have stepped around the door, through a gaping hole in the house's wall, but Gabriel was in violent humour this early morning. He stepped though, his blood-hued armour and gold winged-skull crest turned a deep sanguine by the surrounding flames. The two silver service studs on his scalp glistened.

'Where is he?' Gabriel roared in frustration.

Librarian Isador Akios did not answer. He moved through the rubble with a grace that belied his bulky librarian's armour. Arcane banners fluttered lightly from his shoulder guard and his features were as broad as Gabriel's. But somehow, Isador seemed smaller than the Blood Raven captain, even though the crest-standard of a winged skull rode high above Isador's helmet. It was as though Gabriel's unwavering conviction added to his already impressive stature. And Isador wasn't easily cowed, as Gabriel knew. He was the most powerful librarian in service to the Blood Ravens; he was the most powerful one Gabriel knew. Yet, Gabriel still eclipsed him.

'If he is not here,' Isador said, measuring his words carefully, 'then might I recommend we return to the task at hand?'

Gabriel said nothing. He moved deeper into the house, bearing his shoulder against fallen beams blocking a door. The servos of his exo-gauntlet whined briefly before he shoved aside the heavy debris one-armed, and moved further into the darkness. Gabriel knew what to expect, but he wanted to see it with his own eyes. Nothing. The room was empty.

'Captain?' Isador said.

Gabriel remained silent. He wasn't in the mood to listen.

'My friend,' Isador repeated finally. 'I sense no thoughts here. He's fled.'

'No!' Gabriel spun around, slamming his fist into a wall, anchoring it wrist-deep in concrete. 'Esmond hasn't fled.' Gabriel pulled his hand from the wall and pushed past Isador. 'Mark my words.'

'I hope he's worthy of such praise,' Isador said after Gabriel, following him outside. They stood among the ruins of

buildings that bled a choking smoke into the night air. All around them, the sounds of bolt and plasma fire cut screams to the quick while deeper, within the heart of the city of Bastillius itself, explosions rattled the senses and sent debris raining down in the surrounding blocks. The captain heard little of it, however. This pandemonium was familiar to him, this war-song his serenade to the Emperor.

'Gabriel,' Isador said. 'Look around you. We are here to bear witness to this. We are the last who will see this world alive. We should return to the Grey Knights before this quest of yours endangers the Blood Ravens.'

Gabriel spun on his heel and walked up to Isador, staring him straight in his black eyes, piercing him with a nail-hammered gaze. 'Are you saying the Blood Ravens do not stand with me in this?'

'We do stand with you,' Isador said. 'Through whatever hell you charge into, you'll find us at your side.'

'But?'

'But let the cause be just. We will follow you, but don't abuse our trust in you. What is one man's life in all this?' Isador said, spreading his arms to encompass the destruction around them. 'What is one man's fate compared to the will of the Emperor?'

'Nothing,' Gabriel admitted through gritted teeth.

Isador nodded. 'Nothing.'

There were only ruins around them, Gabriel realised, blackened carapaces of hollowed buildings, the cries for help, the streaks of light that brought death in their wake. 'We'll return to the land speeder,' Gabriel said. 'Scout the area on behalf of our Grey Knight brethren. But on my word... on my word, I will do what I must if I see him.'

'I-' Isador said, but Gabriel silenced him with a cautioning finger and stared at him until the librarian finally nodded. 'Very well,' he said with a sigh. 'I'll help. If only to save you from yourself.'

Gabriel smiled. 'I knew you were good for something, brother.' He headed back to

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the land speeder which hovered a few inches from the ground in the empty street.

'Captain,' Isador said.

Gabriel turned to find Isador staring out into the ash-choked distance, where flashes danced through the haze and earth-rending shudders shook the ground.

'Over there,' the librarian whispered. A flash of coruscating energy flashing across the open plates of his helm. 'Psykers do battle.'

Gabriel recognised Isador's tone, it was his war voice that delighted in the anticipation of battle. Touching his ear module, Gabriel brought the silenced comm-net chatter back into focus.

'...retinue. Inquisitor Lord Ca... fallen... encount... heavy psyker resis... Gregoriask Dist...', a voice cried before a wail of static erupted over Gabriel's earpiece.

Both men jumped into the speeder's seats, nimble despite their heavy armour. Isador gunned the throttle and sent the craft gliding through the debris-clogged streets.

'All Blood Raven squads in the vicinity of Gregoriask,' Gabriel said. 'Converge on my signal.'

They headed toward the thick curtain of smoke.



THE SURROUNDING buildings were phantoms in the swirling dust, the battle hidden in quick bursts of lightning and fractured screams. Isador steered the land speeder, reacting to obstacles before they appeared from the ashen mists mere metres away. Obstacles raced by Gabriel, but he was focused on what lay ahead of them. He half-stood in his chair, bracing one foot against the seat, ready to pounce from his perch.

They shot past a ruined Rhino with its jagged metal petals blossomed open.

Flashes ahead caught Gabriel's attention. The craft decelerated and Gabriel leaped from his seat, momentum carrying him forward through the fog. He landed in a run and jumped again, clearing several metres more with his quick stride.

Ahead, in the fog, a cowled psyker appeared. Dark sigils covered his clothing and from him emanated the stench of darkness. Metal tubes snaked from the back of his skull, he bore a shark's smile and twin embers of hellish light for eyes. Energy coursed around him and he fired once into the darkness, trying to hit Isador. By the time he noticed Gabriel's charge, it was too late. The captain pressed the barrel of his bolt pistol into the psyker's temple and fired, rocking him off his feet and slamming him into the ground.

Gabriel never slowed his pace.

Running, he scanned the darkness for more targets. About him, screams and weapons discharges tore through the night, as did the whine of Isador's land speeder and the *whump-whump* of its mounted heavy bolter. Another shape appeared from the mists, this one bulky and laden with prosthetics. It swung around at Gabriel's approach. Gabriel could see that its arms had been replaced with melta cannons and a chain blade, its upper body crawling with preservation tubes and armour plates. One eye was gone, replaced by a large implant. It was an inquisitor's gun servitor, tracking movement with a servo-skull. The servitor nodded to Gabriel before opening fire into the darkness, screaming its holy fury at some invisible enemy.

Gabriel swung wide and to the outside, following the servitor's superheated thermal discharges, but keeping his distance lest the blast's halo cook him instead. Something returned fire back at the servitor, the mist displaced by the scorching pressure wave of a raw psyblast. It tore up and blistered the ground in its passage, striking the gun servitor in its chest. It screamed, white-hot pyrokinetic flames engulfing it. Gabriel ran faster, knowing what would come next. The fire ignited the pyrum-petrol gases that still lingered in the

servitor's fuel lines, back into his subdermal reservoirs. The explosion spread the servitor's body across two dozen red metres.

The shockwave threw Gabriel through the air. He landed, fell and was back on his feet again, his eyes scanning the turbulent mists for his opponent, as if nothing had happened.

The psyker betrayed his position, cackling at the servitor's expense. Gabriel gritted his teeth and honed in on the psyker's voice. He charged into the darkness, surprise his best weapon. The mists parted, revealing a mutant, his neck twisted one-hundred-and eighty degrees and his bearded face stretched long. His four eyes blinked, offset from one another, and he stared straight at Gabriel with a malicious grin. Surprise did not belong to the captain.

Before Gabriel could raise his bolter, the psyker unleashed another scorching psyblast. Gabriel dodged to the side, avoiding the flare that ripped past him, but not the blast's superheated corona. Even through his armour, it blistered the skin on his neck and scalp. He fired at the psyker from the ground, punching large holes in his opponent's chest and skull; it fell to the ground.

Gabriel raised himself to one knee as a third psyker entered his field of vision, electricity crackling about his body. Even the robes on this one couldn't conceal the misshapen bulk hiding beneath. With subtle grace, Gabriel touched his earpiece.

'Die,' the creature hissed, raising his arm.

'Only when the Emperor so instructs,' Gabriel responded.

Before the psyker could react, Isador's land speeder burst forth from the mists. Isador caught the mutant in the face with the vehicle's front grill, decapitating him. Gabriel's earpiece erupted with new comm-net chatter and a squad of Grey Knights loomed out of the smoke. Their armour was of burnished silver and engraved runes glowed a subdued gold. They were impressive and would have brought any man to his knees in reverence, but Gabriel was not so easily cowed by

these glorious servants. He stood and nodded. He would meet them as equals.



THE GREY KNIGHT apothecary sprayed the burns on Gabriel's neck. The wounds calcified into dead, hardened skin while the apothecary offered the Litany of Healing and peeled off the flakes. Gabriel didn't grimace at the large patches of skin being torn away. His thoughts rested elsewhere.

'We sensed rogue pykers in the area and were on our way to cleanse them with fire. It seems you beat us to it,' the apothecary said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gabriel saw Sergeant Caine of the Blood Ravens standing by Isador's side. They waited for the apothecary to finish his healing rituals.

'Are we done, good brother?' Gabriel asked the Grey Knight.

'Almost,' he responded before jabbing the hypo-spike into Gabriel's neck. A burning liquid rushed into Gabriel's jugular, scouring infections from his system.

Gabriel rubbed his neck and walked over to Caine and Isador. They waited for the apothecary to walk out of earshot.

'We stayed off the comm-net channels as you requested,' Caine said to Gabriel.

'Did you find him?' Gabriel asked.

'We did, brother-captain. Brother Ulray and his squad sequestered Esmond in the St. Bellstus Bunker in New Carnith.'

'We must hurry,' Isador said. 'The Grey Knights are moving through the area, eliminating all in their path. If they catch Brother Ulray harbouring a fugitive... well.'

'Very well,' Gabriel replied. 'Thank you for your help, Brother Caine. Return to your sweep sector and avoid arousing the Inquisition's suspicions. Comply with their every demand. If they ask for me, do not lie for my benefit. I will not see anyone else dragged into this.'

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With a curt nod, Caine walked away, rejoining his squad.

'We should hurry,' Isador said.

Gabriel studied Isador for a moment, one eyebrow raised. 'I'm surprised,' he said. 'I thought you believed my actions misguided. Why encourage me to see Esmond?'

'Because if you don't,' Isador said, 'then you'll always wonder. And if you wonder, then you'll be distracted, and distraction leads to dangerous places.'

'You hope doing this will clear my thoughts.'

'I wish you clarity, Gabriel. I know you. You are strongest when you remain a focused instrument of the Emperor's will. Your heart should have space for none other.'

'Very well,' Gabriel said, then paused. 'I could order you to stay behind.'

'You could,' Isador said, getting into the land speeder. He sat down in the driver's seat, looking straight ahead. 'But why force me to disobey an order?'

A crooked smile tugged at the corner of Gabriel's lips. He sat in the passenger's seat and watched the ground fall away as they rose skyward.



ACLEAN WIND FROM the Canarrin Mountains swept over Bastillius, dragging away much of the ash fog, but doing nothing to improve the vista. The city burned and the fires spread with a rapacious hunger, forcing the land speeder to duck beneath the black canopy of smoke. The craft skimmed over cratered buildings and ruined hulks, buffeted from sudden drafts and hot columns.

From his vantage point, Gabriel studied the streets below, the apocalypse of a world unfolding in hellish detail. Squads of Inquisitorial storm troopers, wearing red cloth and gun grey armour, moved through the streets. They directed their meltaguns

against the adjoining building, through windows and holes, herding the hidden occupants out into the streets, where others waited to cut them down in a blistering hail of fire. Those who didn't escape the buildings died in the inferno.

Further on, Grey Knight Terminators served as artillery units, firing gas grenades into fleeing crowds. Those caught in the noxious fumes screamed short-lived cries, before the acid clouds seared out their lungs. They fell to the ground convulsing, their skin sloughing off as the gas ate at the connective tissue anchoring flesh and muscle to bones. They died after several minutes of agony, skin draped loose over their own skeletons.

Gabriel slammed his hand against the land speeder's door, his blow rocking the vehicle and leaving behind an appreciable dent. Isador didn't react, but Gabriel knew that his eyes darted in his direction.

'They earned this fate, Gabriel,' Isador said.

'I know,' Gabriel responded through clenched teeth. 'But this is my...' He trailed off. Isador already knew what this place meant to Gabriel.

'I know these streets. I once lived here,' Gabriel said.

Isador said nothing at first, and Gabriel knew he didn't appreciate the weight of that statement. The librarian was raised in a monastery, training to control his power, to resist the whispers of the warp. He had no home. Nothing to watch die.

'Cyrene was your home centuries ago, my friend,' Isador said. 'Nearly everyone you know is dead and gone.'

'But not their children, or the names I remember.'

'Do you doubt the wisdom of this?' Isador said, his brows furrowed.

'No!' Gabriel replied, angry that Isador would suspect him of the most hateful of all sins: the sin of doubt. 'This action is just! Even if I was asked to end the life of every man, woman and child here, one bullet at a time, then I would do so. The planet was steeped in heresy, the taint of the warp in her very soil!'

'Then why are you angry?' Isador asked.

'Because they fell to heresy. My people, Isador, my entire world! It is corrupt enough to sanction the destruction of every last soul. They failed the Emperor, and for what? Tell me. They sacrificed their very salvation for what?'

'I don't know, my friend. And for that, I am glad.'

'And look at the Inquisition down there. Look at them, cackling at their duty. This is not sport. This is a just and holy cause, yet...' Gabriel said, trailing off, suddenly realising he felt spent.

'Yet what?' Isador asked.

Gabriel looked at the librarian and saw no suspicious glances, no sense of disgust, just concern for a friend.

'And yet,' Gabriel said, 'the Inquisition acts like a plague of locusts.'

'That is their role in this. Their duty. It is up to them to be the terrible plague, ridding the planet of this taint.'

'I do not question their place in the Emperor's plan,' Gabriel said. 'Neither do I question the importance of all this. Let this diseased world be amputated, lest the scourge of heresy infect more worlds. I just wonder if there are none here who deserve a quick, quiet death. Not everyone here is corrupt. Surely not all deserve their burning fate, nor the renouncement of their names? Not all were so weak as to fall. I wish we could leave them their dignity in their final hours.'

'Who are we to take that chance?' Isador asked. 'I would prefer a million innocent victims to die than to suffer one false martyr to the dark to escaped our notice. A hollow saint undermines, no, mocks, the sanctity of our faith. And remember, nobody here is innocent. The Inquisition deemed it so. The heresy was too widespread, too pervasive, for anyone to miss its presence. If they knew of the sacrilege, then they are guilty of doing nothing. And if they didn't notice so obvious a plague, then they must pay for their blindness. There is no innocence here, Gabriel. There is only heresy, and the duty to eradicate it.' Isador paused, obviously considering his next words.

'What is it St. Galantain said?'

Gabriel closed his eyes, bringing the verse to memory. 'Let each sacrifice be a lesson unto others. I sacrifice my eyes so that others might see. I sacrifice my tongue so you are not swayed by sweet words.' He opened his eyes in time to see Isador nod appreciatively. 'You're saying Cyrene shouldn't be viewed in context to its own misery?' Gabriel asked.

'This lesson is not meant for Cyrene. It is a lesson for others, that ignorance is not the same as innocence. Now, citizens of the Imperium will be more vigilant against the followers of the ruinous powers lest their own worlds suffer this fate.'

Gabriel looked down again and saw all the servo-skulls floating around, taking account of events and recording everything for the sake of posterity. Strange how he never noticed them before. 'Such spectacle,' he said to himself.

'But necessary. Otherwise why would we to all this trouble?'

That's when Gabriel saw something on the ground flash, then the corkscrewing smoke trail.

'Missile!' Gabriel shouted, but it was too late.



THE MISSILE swallowed the land speeder's starboard stabiliser wing in a bloom of fire, sending the craft screaming earthward. Gabriel muttered the Litany of Safe Landing and gripped the door's frame, while Isador fought for control of the vessel; he managed to pull up from the dive at the last moment, sending the land speeder skidding down a decimated street, tearing up plascrete.

The land speeder came to a stop, both wings shredded and sparking wires hanging from rent seams. Gabriel and Isador stumbled out from the vehicle, rattled but unharmed. Isador muttered a thanks to the land speeder's machine spirit for

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delivering them safely. Gabriel scanned the burned-out hulks of the local buildings for signs of their attackers.

They didn't wait long.

A small cluster of people emerged from the ruins, perhaps ten or fifteen, their expressions hard and their eyes like knives. Some were from Cyrene's Imperial Guard regiments; others carried weapons scavenged from fallen inquisitors and storm troopers. None bore the taint of Chaos.

Isador stepped forward, ready to engage the rabble, but Gabriel cleared his throat, stopping him. The librarian looked at him, his eyes betraying his confusion.

Then he understood.

More people were hiding in the buildings, armed with the Emperor knew what. Isador relaxed, though Gabriel knew he was ready to lash out with the formidable psyker abilities at his disposal.

Gabriel studied the people who advanced slowly, cautiously, their plundered weapons at the ready. The captain could see that some didn't even understand the nature of their firearms. None knew how to appease the spirit of the machine or offer Litanies for the Pulling of the Trigger or Arming of the Magazine. They were angry, and they were frightened, and they wanted blood.

Gabriel decided to goad more out from the shadows, to reveal their true numbers.

'If you are trying to frighten us with this pitiful flock, I suggest you return when you have more people,' Gabriel said and turned around to walk away. Around them, more citizens stepped out from the shadows of buildings blocking their path, holding pipes and makeshift weapons. The dozen turned into a mob of two hundred, with Isador and Gabriel surrounded.

'I offer you a quick, painless death, which is more than you deserve,' Gabriel said.

'Deserve?' a woman said, her voice an eagle's screech, her plump body covered with tiny wounds and dust. 'We didn't deserve this.'

'Then what did you deserve?' Isador asked. 'Praise for allowing heresy to fester beneath your very noses?'

'We are not heretics!' an old guardsman cried, waving an arm which had been amputated at the elbow. 'I lost my limb for the Emperor.'

'And yet you desecrate that honour now,' Gabriel said. 'How sad that you couldn't serve your Emperor here, when it truly mattered. Better we rid Him of such hollow devotion.'

The old man spat in disgust and raised his lasgun to fire. Gabriel was quicker and fired first. The guardsman's head exploded, spraying those around him. The crowd shrieked, some falling back, others rushing forward to tear at Gabriel and Isador with their bare hands and clubs.

Isador was the first to act, his armour crackling with electricity, his movements blindingly quick as he swung his cable-mounted axe, dismembering people in the crowd two or three at a time.

Gabriel did nothing to hide his rage. His temper unravelled, slipping with each burst of violence against his own people. Anger surging forth, Gabriel's field of vision tightened until the world narrowed into dagger-points. He raged against the mass of bodies throwing themselves at him, trying to tear him apart.

'How could you do this?' Gabriel said, crushing three people with the sweep of his gauntlet. 'How could you allow this to happen? You gave heresy a home in your own shadows. Whether by ignorance or indolence, you did this to yourselves!'

The crowd shrieked in anger and more people threw themselves upon the two Space Marines. Gabriel could no longer see Isador.

'How dare you do this to my home,' Gabriel screamed, his voice deafening, his bolter dropping attackers two and three at a shot. 'Everything I knew,' Gabriel continued as he threw one man into several others. 'St. Garryin's Monument, the Bachsellian Festivals, the Spring-Borne Lakes, the Winter Lights of the South, all gone because of you!'

'How could you do this to us?' someone cried out. 'How could you destroy your own people?'

'Damn you!' Gabriel roared. 'Damn you for drawing this upon yourselves and damn you for making me your executioner. Who do you think discovered your shame? Who do you think it was who brought the Inquisition here?'

'You betrayed us,' someone said, before Gabriel crushed him underfoot.

'I did not betray you,' Gabriel screamed, his indignation uncontained. 'I merely lifted the rock and found you squirming beneath. You betrayed yourselves.'

More bodies fell upon Gabriel, but none could damp his fury. He raged against all those who touched him, cutting lives with the brutal mercy of bolts, fists and boots.



THE TWO MARINES walked in silence, deeper into the heart of Bastillius where buildings lay in piles of burning rubble and the ravens sang serenades to the corpses. Gabriel's march was silent, his thoughts as dark as the night around him. Isador remained quiet. Gabriel could see he was invigorated after the massacre, a chance to destroy heresy was a powerful affirmation of his own faith in the Emperor. But the librarian was also wise enough not to say anything. This was not a victory for Gabriel. It was his troubled duty, and Isador had known Gabriel long enough to recognise the distinction.

Both men continued their march across the city, with Gabriel determined to reach the St. Bellstus Bunker in New Carnith. Both were caked in the filth of death, their every victim having left something of themselves behind on their armour.

And they walked because Gabriel refused to contact anyone via the vox, he refused to draw any more of his men into his personal quest, or to reveal his position.

Gabriel and Isador stood upon the rise of the hill that was once crowned with monolithic buildings. All that remained were the streets and the flattened terrain. Massive earth movers had shoved the rubble into the crude fortifications that now surrounded the Crucivex Camp at the foot of the hill. Gabriel and Isador stared down, their minds unprepared for what lay below them.

The Crucivex Camp stretched into the darkness for miles. Tens of thousands of Cyrene's citizens had been crucified on crosses, their lifeless – or near lifeless – bodies dangling from cross bars, their death one of slow suffocation. None could cry out, so the flocks of ravens did it for them. In the chaotic maze of hanging bodies, servo-skulls wove lazy paths, recording everything as a warning to others who would truck with heresy.

Gabriel and Isador said nothing. Their surprise was naught but a brief pause, long enough to register the fact that they'd never witnessed this particular horror. But now they had. Now it was time to go on.

Their path took the duo through the ruins of this place, past breaks in the high walls of rubble, past the bare, impaled feet of the crucified and through the forest of crosses. For the hour they walked, the occasional victim stirred, but most noise came from the buzzing corpse-flies, laying their eggs in the dead, and the ravens who feasted upon this unexpected banquet.

The sound of a lasgun stopped the pair. Gabriel and Isador waited, their breaths held to hear more reports. A moment later, there was another shot, the discharge muted.

They moved toward the sound, careful of their surroundings. A third shot finally brought them within sight on a black-haired Imperial Guardsman. He was young and without the blemish of a scar or cybernetic augment, a neophyte to Cyrene's defence force and now among the doomed. He looked broken, his clothing ripped and covered in dust, his arm bandaged for some wound that drew flies to it, and a lasgun hanging limply at his side. He walked among the crosses, searching for anyone

who was still alive, defying the Inquisition who had left this dead place for better killing fields. When he found someone, their breaths shallow and their wounds still bleeding, he fired a shot into their forehead. He didn't notice either Space Marine as he walked away from them.

Isador's eyes narrowed, he stepped forward, intent on stopping him. Gabriel placed his hand on the librarian's shoulder.

'He has no right to end their suffering,' Isador replied, but Gabriel shook his head. He drew his bolt pistol. There were two rounds left. The fight with the mob had drained his ammunition.

Gabriel ejected one round into the palm of his gauntlet – he would have need of that later – and pointed the pistol at the soldier.

He fired.

The shot nicked his bicep; he screamed in surprise and ran, vanishing into the darkness. Isador stared at Gabriel, not daring to ask the question. The captain offered nothing and continued walking. He left the question hanging in the air, but Isador knew as well as anyone else.

Gabriel rarely missed.



DAWN APPROACHED, yet the sky remained dark and overcast with clouds of soot and ash. The city was quiet in these early hours, the harrying Inquisition marching westward in gigantic convoys and leaving the city to its appointed hour with the fleet's orbital mass drivers. Less than a half-hour remained.

Gabriel and Isador reached St. Bellstus's Shrine: an old bunker now exposed to the heavens. Its exterior was monolithic, a squat rectangular building that once rested far beneath the earth. During an ork invasion that had swept through the system decades before, the bunker was the site of a great massacre after the orks had

breached its defences, slaughtering the thousands inside. When the Imperium reclaimed the world they dug up the bunker and turned it into a shrine.

Outside the single, open-mouthed entrance, the blond-haired Brother Ulray waited with another Blood Raven, Akios, by their land speeder. They both looked apprehensive. Ulray quickly donned his helmet at Gabriel's approach and ran up to him.

'Do you have Esmond?' Gabriel asked.

'We do. We caught him trying to flee the city.'

Gabriel gritted his teeth, but otherwise did not react to the news. Akios looked away: Gabriel knew he enjoyed being right about most things, only he didn't want to be right about this. He didn't want to be right at Gabriel's expense, and that bothered Gabriel even more.

'Captain,' Ulray said. 'The Inquisition have ordered our evacuation to the city of Sestra. The orbital bombardment begins soon. I ordered my squad to leave, but—'

'You did well,' Gabriel said, his gaze fixed upon the bunker's entrance. 'Give me ten minutes, then send a Thunderhawk for us.'

'As you wish, captain, but hurry. He's in the rear shrine. We barricaded the door. May the Emperor watch over you.' Ulray ran for the land speeder. The other Blood Raven was already invoking the machine's spirit, readying it for flight. They sped off quickly.

'This is as far as you go,' Gabriel told to Isador.

'Very well, old friend,' Isador said. 'But you know whose will you must serve in this.'

'There is one God, and He is my Emperor, Isador. I am His instrument in all things.'

'I do not doubt your faith, Gabriel,' Isador said. 'In fact, I marvel at your conviction, and I envy you the well you draw your strength from. Just remember that your actions are just, even if you may question them.'

'I know my actions are just, old friend,' Gabriel said, walking toward the door.

'And, as in all things, truth needs pain to make it real.'



THERE WOULD BE no one left to honour the dead here Gabriel realised as he walked the hallways. The bunker-shrine served as a sepulchre that interred the skulls of all those massacred in St. Bellstus during the ork invasion. The skulls now sat inside grate-covered niches along the walls, each one painted red and blue with prayers and decorated with wax imprints and rune-covered banners. In a few hours, they'd be buried under rubble, with nobody to remember their names or celebrate their lives. In a few hours, the spirits of the thousands who died here would be joined by millions more. Their voices would be lost in the chorus of heretics.

Gabriel reached the rear shrine and found the double doors chained. It was easy enough to kick it open with his heavy boot, scattering splinters across the floor. Inside the candlelit shrine were the skulls of the unnamed dead, stacked in columns, an altar for prayer and four rows of pews. Praying at the altar was an old man. His eyes were milky, his bald head covered with liver spots, his face caked in stubble and filth and his body covered in a network of tubes and filters that wheezed as they pumped rejuvenation fluids into his organs. The old man recognised Gabriel and straightened, an act of defiance that seemed to belie his long years.

'You're here to kill me?' Esmond said, his voice raspy.

'That I do not know, father. That I do not know,' Gabriel responded.



ATTENTION, BASTILLIUS cleanser units. This is a final call for evacuation of all Inquisition, Grey Knight, Storm trooper and Blood Raven squads. Regroup at staging area ten miles east of Sestra. Expect heavy resistance from active XIV Cyrene Guard Legion. Orbital bombardment commences in ten min-'

Gabriel tapped his ear piece, lowering the barrage of noise from the vox. He studied his father who matched his gaze with equal venom, his eyes glittering in the candlelight.

'Where were you trying to escape to?' Gabriel asked calmly. 'You should know there is no place left to flee.'

'I will not die cowering like an animal,' he spat.

'No, instead you forced me to chase you down like one.'

'You will excuse me if I don't apologise.'

'It wouldn't matter,' Gabriel said, waving his hand. 'I wouldn't accept your apology. Forgiveness is a means of earning a second knife in your back.'

'Yes. Imagine, then, my surprise when the knife I found in my back belonged to my own son.'

'I swore to protect the Imperium against all manner of threat.'

'I am not a heretic,' Esmond said with a mechanical hiss in his voice.

'But you are a coward.'

'Better I the coward, than you the butcher!' Esmond's outburst sent him into a coughing fit. He spat up black liquid. No doubt one of his rejuvenation pumps was leaking.

'It means nothing to me. Butcher. Murderer. Assassin. I have been called them all today, yesterday, in the weeks before. And I will hear them in the weeks to come.'

'You... must be very... proud,' Esmond said between gasps.

'Proud? I am, that I can serve the Emperor against all adversaries. But that my adversaries include members of my own world, my own family. That is hard to take.'

'Gabriel, you've betrayed us. For the sake of eliminating a handful of heretics, you condemned our entire planet. Your home, your own blood!'

'It isn't for a handful, father. Do you think me so ruthless? The corruption is complete, and complete enough to blind you all.'

'We weren't blind,' Esmond said. 'And it wasn't heresy. We were tired of living under the Emperor's rule. It was a rebellion of ideals, not religion.'

'So you knew?' Gabriel asked, his worst fear realised.

'I knew. And I embraced it. Our ideals were just.'

'There is no ideal but the Emperor's!'

'Spare me the hollow mantras. I taught you to think for yourself.'

'And I do. With a terrible clarity, but I do.'

'I hope you realise that your so-called ideals were a doorway for Chaos to slip through. Good men and women are fighting the heretics infesting the sewers of Undergauth. All the psykers from the local Pathfinder Gymnasium were turned, as were high-ranking officers within the Imperial Guard.'

'They'd have you believing anything, now. They lied to you.'

'No, it was you who were lied to. The minions of Chaos led you astray and you walked in their company, blissfully ignorant. Heresy is heresy, and it was widespread. Even now, the Inquisition is questioning all Cyrene guardsman off world, and I doubt any will survive the torture, or escape from this unscathed!'

'Except you,' Esmond said.

'What?'

'You will escape this unscathed.' Esmond said, regaining his strength for what Gabriel knew to be his next venomous attack. 'You requested this destruction, and thus, are above blame or fault in this. The last innocent son of Cyrene, only...'

'Only what?' Gabriel said, trying to keep his temper contained.

'Only, you did not see the corruption either, until it was too late. Are you not,

therefore, guilty of being blind yourself? Are you not guilty of our so-called sin?'

'What is this? Some feeble attempt to riddle my mind with doubt? Guilt? Now you are speaking like a heretic.'

'Oh, that would be an easier pill to swallow, wouldn't it? Far easier for you to kill the heretic than your own innocent father. Well then, kill me. Do what you came to do. But have the courage to look me in my eyes and acknowledge my innocence.'

Gabriel studied his father a moment, searching for some deception. He saw none, but felt a low rumble move beneath his feet. It wouldn't stop. The bombardment had begun further east, and was getting closer.

'I will do no such thing,' Gabriel replied.

'Then who's the coward now? You wish to kill me? Use your bolter, put me in your sights, and say: "Father, you are an innocent man in all this." Then pull the trigger.'

'No,' Gabriel said without a shred of emotion. 'I came here so you could take your own life, not to execute you.' Gabriel put his bolt pistol on the altar. 'Reclaim your pride. Do what is right and let me remember you the hero, not the coward. It has one bolt left, for you.'

Gabriel watched his father, while around them both, dust drifted down from the ceiling, shaken loose from the earth-torn tremors growing in magnitude. Esmond looked at the bolt pistol and picked it up, its size and weight ungainly in his feeble grip.

Esmond shook his head. 'You're lying,' he said, and put down the gun. 'The man I raised wouldn't leave a bolt in a weapon, so he could be killed by it. And if you were so stupid, I still wouldn't turn the bolter on myself. Better my blood on your hands, so you might never wash it off.'

Gabriel took the bolter from the altar and removed the clip.

'Hiding behind the coming bombardment?' Esmond said. 'Asking me to kill

myself, to spare you that pain? Who's the coward now?'

'You are right that I am not such a fool as to stay defenceless.' Gabriel removed the round hidden in his belt pouch and shoved it into the clip with a small prayer. 'But I am not a coward. I will kill you.' He pointed the bolter at Esmond. 'But I had hoped that you would prove yourself the brave man I remembered.'

'And I hope you are orphaned from everything and everyone you hold dear,' Esmond said. 'I curse the day your mother spat you out from between her legs.'

'At least she had the courage to turn the bolter on herself,' Gabriel said before he pulled the trigger.



THE BLUES AND whites of Cyrene were gone, swallowed by a choking death. All that remained was a ceiling of black clouds and the occasional hellish glow of magma-fuelled fires from where the orbital bombardment had shattered the crust.

Cyrene was dead. Yet, that did not stop the orbiting fleet from broad-siding the planet with their cannons.

If Gabriel noticed his burning world through the starboard chancel's bay windows, however, he showed no emotion. Instead, he remained kneeling before the impassive Grand Master Qanox, a Grey Knight Space Marine who dwarfed the captain in stature. Qanox was impressive in his silver armour and the long strips of parchment intertwined around both arms. In his hands, he held a special writ, while at his side, a robed hierophant with tubes snaking in and out of her robes, read aloud:

'...and let all know that by decree of the sovereign might of the Golden Throne of Terra, that Captain Gabriel Angelos acted with righteous diligence in requesting the destruction of Cyrene,

and that he is found innocent of the heresy tainting the planet.'

Gabriel accepted the writ.

'You did well, last son of Cyrene,' Qanox said. 'Stand and rejoin your brethren, as an equal.'

The room exploded into cheers as the Blood Ravens surrounded the captain, forcing him to his feet. Qanox nodded once and left the room with the hierophant in tow, leaving the Blood Ravens to their moment.

Gabriel remained grim-faced throughout, even after they toasted him for his innocence and drifted off into smaller groups, talking of their recent exploits on the now-dead world. Only Isador remained by the captain's side.

'Careful,' Isador said quietly and nodded to the writ.

Gabriel suddenly realised he was gripping it so hard that he was creasing the parchment. He loosened his grip, but not his expression.

'I thought you should know,' Isador said. 'We leave orbit tomorrow, the machine spirits willing.'

'I thought we were to remain here for the week,' Gabriel said, momentarily forgetting his sorrow.

'The fleet will remain, but we are to escort the Hellwatch Battlegroup. An ork fleet has entered the Tartarus system and the Imperium is dispatching us to handle the invasion.'

'Tartarus? Why is that name familiar?' Gabriel asked.

'It is a pilgrim world, with a very important saint. She lies near the Eye of Terror and has endured several Black Crusades.'

Gabriel smiled. 'I know it now. Good libraries?'

'Supposedly,' Isador said with a grin. 'There are some tomes that our Chapter's library needs desperately.'

'Good. You can visit them when we are done with the orks. After these two weeks,' Gabriel said, staring out at Cyrene, 'a little war will be a welcome relief.'



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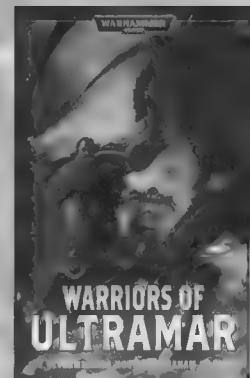
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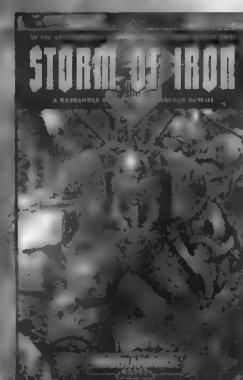


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Kattenkrieg

By Robert Earl



HE SCRATCHING had started again. Freda lay huddled in the darkness, cold sweat gluing her nightdress to her trembling body. In the light of the day it was a pretty thing, this nightdress. She'd chosen it because of the rabbit pattern sewn into the hem. Tonight, with the pattern hidden by darkness, it felt like a shroud.

Her knuckles were already bruised, but she carried on gnawing at them anyway, like a rat with a bone. Even when her sharp, little teeth tore through the skin and her mouth filled with the bitter, hot, copper taste of blood, she couldn't stop.

Tonight there were more things to worry about than cuts and bruises. Horrible things.

Beneath the weight of her terror, Freda struggled to remember the words of a prayer, any prayer that might make the scratching stop. But she struggled in vain. All she could think of was the thing in the cupboard and how far away her father was.

Then the sound stopped. The pause lasted for a second, then a dozen, and then a dozen more. Freda held her breath, willing the silence to last. At length she felt the first tiny flicker of relief and took her fist out of her mouth. Slowly, with as much courage as a warrior entering a dragon's lair, she raised her head from beneath the covers and peered towards the cupboard.

A loud impact banged against its doors.

With a shriek, Freda leapt from her bed, ran from the room and raced down the stairs. Her feet pounded on the floorboards, like a drummer sounding the retreat, the noise of her flight making her run all the faster.

'Daddy!' she screamed, as she fled down the short hall to his study, the rabbits on her nightdress snapping about her heels.

'Daddy!' She flung open the heavy wooden door and burst inside. Magretta, the house maid, sprang up from her place on Freda's father's knee, her cheeks burning. The old man himself also seemed a little flushed.

But Freda didn't care if they both had the flu. She just wanted to be with her daddy. With a leap she flung herself into his arms.

'What is it?' he asked, his tone a kaleidoscope of embarrassment, anger and concern. 'Nightmares?' He stroked her hair, feeling the sweat that had turned her beautiful mane of golden hair into dank rats' tails.

'You're trembling,' he said.

'It was the thing in the cupboard again,' she whined, clinging to him. He exchanged a glance with Magretta and shrugged.

'Oh,' her father said, and sighed. 'Well, let's go and have a look, then.'

'No!'

'Yes. It's just your imagination.'

Taking the lantern from the table, he swung her onto his hip and carried her back upstairs. He grimaced a little at her weight. She seemed to be getting bigger by the day now, and he was no longer a young man. But Freda was oblivious to the effort the climb cost him. She stared into the shadows ahead, her expression as grim as a convict climbing the gallows.

'Look,' her father said, lifting the lantern to chase the shadows back behind the tumbled mess of her bed. 'No monsters.'

'The cupboard,' she whispered, edging around behind him.

With a grunt, he lowered her to the floor and walked over to the twin mahogany doors. He opened them with a theatrical flourish. Inside a wall of hanging clothes hid the camphor wood rear of the cupboard, and for a moment he thought about pulling them aside and pretending to find something behind them. But, with the suspicion that such a joke might backfire and the knowledge that Magretta was waiting for him downstairs, he decided against it.

'There, you see?' he said. 'Just clothes. Very pretty clothes for a very pretty girl. And perhaps some mice, but you're too big to be scared of little mice, aren't you?'

Freda nodded doubtfully.

'Good girl. Now, hop into bed. I'll leave the lamp and send Magretta up to check on you later.'

'Why not now?'

'Because she's, ah, busy.'

With a little sigh, Freda climbed back into her bed. At least he was leaving her the light. Daddy lent down and kissed her on the forehead, his whiskers tickling her skin, then he turned and left her, closing the door behind him as she pulled the blankets up to her chin.

The thing in the cupboard waited until he had returned to his study before it started scratching again. It was soft but insistent, like the throbbing of a rotten tooth, but this time she fought against the fear. The lamp helped. Even though Daddy had turned it down it still bathed the room in a warm light that somehow seemed to hold the noise at bay.

'It's just mice,' she whispered to herself as the scratching was replaced by a series of sharp, crunching sounds.

'Shoo!' she said loudly. To her immense relief, the noises stopped.

'You're just mice,' she told the cupboard triumphantly. She raised her head farther up out of the eiderdown, like an archer peeing over a castle wall. The sweet, glorious silence remained unbroken and a sense of triumph began to steal over her.

For a while she savoured her triumph and drifted off towards sleep. It was almost a shame that she had frightened the mice away. They were funny and sweet. And she always impressed daddy by being such a brave girl when they appeared. Not like silly Margetta who screamed and jumped onto chairs. Maybe tomorrow night she would leave out some cheese and see if...

The cupboard door swung silently open. Freda stopped breathing.

'Daddy must have left the latch off,' she told herself. 'He must have.'

But before she could finish the thought, the monsters rushed out. There weren't just one of them but two, four, a dozen. They swarmed over Freda in a single great

mass, their filthy, black hair scratching her smooth skin, their jagged claws gripping her arms and legs like sprung steel rat traps. Freda, almost insane with terror, opened her mouth to scream, to vomit out this paralyzing horror, but a slimy paw thrust itself into her mouth. She gagged at the taste of the rotten skin and was choking as they bound her with thongs of rough leather.

And all the while, the lamp burned upon the table, it's light still and even. The monsters had stirred no more breeze than they had noise. Their tails thrashed excitedly above their writhing bodies like scaly whips.

Within seconds their work was done and they left as noiselessly as they had arrived, slipping through the hole they had so painstakingly chewed through the back of Freda's cupboard.

So it was, that when Magretta came to check on her a few hours later, all that remained of the little girl was a torn scrap of her nightdress: an embroidered rabbit torn in two.



THE SHRINE WAS so old that it looked more like a thing grown than a thing built. Centuries of winter storms and harvest suns had rounded off the sharp edges of its masonry, leaving its granite bulk as smooth and featureless as a river washed boulder.

The centuries had blanketed the shrine with ivy, the greenery growing as thick as an old man's beard. Within its rustling depths were many families of birds, the creatures living out their entire span amongst the foliage. In ages past, some of the shrine's keepers had scoured the ivy from the walls because of them. Perhaps they had feared that those whom they were sworn to protect might be disturbed by the constant irreverence of the birdsong.

But the present incumbent had no such delusions. The dead, he knew, were dead. It would take more than a few chattering sparrows to disturb their sleep.

Besides, he liked to watch the birds flitting about the graveyard. Some of them had even grown enough trust to perch on his hunched shoulders as he worked. They'd watch with cocked heads as he chopped wood, drew water, scythed down the grass that poked up like green fingers from between the graves that huddled around the shrine.

And they did huddle, these graves, clustering around the ancient building like lambs around an ewe, nervous lambs that could smell the scent of a wolf. It was a fanciful notion, but the shrine's keeper knew it to be an accurate one. The black depths of the forest that lay beyond his walls were alive with those who sought to enslave the dead. Kings and citadels had fallen beneath the onslaught of these abominations. Armies had been slaughtered. Great walls crumbled to dust.

Yet where they had fallen the shrine had stood, the neatly trimmed hedges that enclosed it remaining inviolate.

Morr, after all, was a powerful god.

The shrine's keeper smiled contentedly at the thought and decided that he'd worked enough for one day. He stood up, pressed his bony thumbs into the knots that had formed in his back and returned to his chamber. There he swapped his scythe for a jug of water, a crust of bread and a handful of small, wrinkled apples.

He sat on one of the gravestones as he ate and watched the sun setting over the forest. He enjoyed the sight as he munched his way through the fruit and scattered his bread to the birds that had flocked to his side. In the light of the setting sun their plumage shone and their shadows were dagger sharp. The priest found himself smiling again.

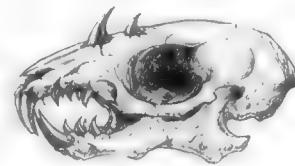
Despite the pain and the suffering, this world was a beautiful place. It was understandable that some men clung to it

in defiance of their preordained span. Unforgivable, but understandable.

With a sigh, the old man glanced down at the liver spots on the back of his hands, the mottled skin there as creased as last month's apples.

'It won't be long before Morr greets me,' he told one of his fluttering friends. As if in silent confirmation, the sun dipped below the horizon and the breeze turned chilly.

As day turned to night, the priest dispersed the last of his bread and hobbled back to the shrine.



HE'D BEEN DREAMING of wide, open grassland, an ocean of green, above which clouds as big as galleys sailed lazily past. In the distance, an old limestone wall stretched across the horizon. Sun-gilded lichen covered every inch of it, except for the single oak door. As he approached, the wood started to shake with the impact of a hard knocking. The sound was as loud as thunder and as relentless as a funeral bell.

It was also absolutely terrifying.

All the same, the keeper ground his teeth together and carried on marching towards the shaking door. A second later he was stood in front of it. His fingers closed around the handle and he pulled, swinging it effortlessly open to reveal...

With a suffocated scream the old man sat bolt upright on his cot, his skin washed with sweat and his bony chest heaving as he gasped for air.

Wide eyed in the darkness of his chamber, he ran his fingertips against the rough stone of the wall. He pulled the covers back and swung his feet onto the floor. The tiles were cold, cold enough to send a welcome chill of reality through his befuddled thoughts.

With a long, shuddering breath, he shook off the last scraps of the dream and ran a trembling hand across the damp skin of his scalp.

Although the dream had gone, the knocking continued. For a moment the priest sat and listened to it, as it rattled against his door with a desperate, knuckle scraping urgency. There was a mute terror in the sound, as though the visitor was living in a nightmare of his own and for a split second the shrine's keeper considered ignoring the summons. But he extinguished that traitorous thought as soon as it appeared. Above all things, he was a priest of Morr. It was his duty to make sure that the dying didn't slip away unshriven, and after sixty years of service his duty was as much a part of him as his bones.

Another volley of impacts rang out. Clenching his jaw, the keeper got painfully to his feet and stumbled blindly over towards the cell's ancient fireplace.

'Have a second's patience,' he called out to his unwelcome guest as he knelt down, knees popping, in front of the fire's charred remains. 'I'm making light.'

The knocking paused for a moment. Then it started again with a renewed urgency.

'Wait,' the priest snapped, then drew in a deep breath and blew. Ash flurried up into the darkness like grey snow, revealing glowing embers beneath. 'I'm coming.'

The priest, ignoring a sudden fit of dizziness, took another breath and blew again. This time a tiny flame burst into life amongst the fire's remains. After the darkness of the unlit cell, the light was painfully bright and the priest wiped a tear from his eye as he fed the fire with tinder.

Only when the fireplace was once more crackling did he turn to the door. Suppressing an edgy sense of *déjà vu*, he made himself walk over to it and lifted the bar.

He closed his fingers around the latch and pulled, swinging it effortlessly open to reveal...

Without a word of warning the door was slammed backwards in a rush of movement and cold night air. Even as the tortured hinges squeaked in protest, a huge figure, shapeless and shadowed in the flaring firelight, burst into the room. The guttering flame revealed it to be a hideous confusion of feathers, and furs and wild, staring eyes.

The shrine's keeper moved with a speed that would have amazed his parishioners. Leaping back as easily as a man half his age, he seized the scythe from its place in the corner. Hefting its bulk upon his bony hip he turned, ready to throw his weight beneath the sweep of the blade. But before he could, the apparition swept the bedraggled mass of felt and feathers off of its head and bowed stiffly, chin to chest in the northern manner.

The priest recovered his wits quickly as he studied the man who stood before him. 'Come in,' he said, his voice level with a soothing calm that he'd practiced on generations of grieving relatives. 'Take a seat.'

His guest watched him return the scythe to its corner. Beneath the filth encrusted mop of his hair and the singed remains of his beard, his face was deathly pale and hard with suspicion. Only when satisfied that the priest wasn't going to attack him did he look away, his eyes flitting about the bare walls of the cell, as though he expected them to spring open in some trap.

'Here, take a seat by the fire,' the priest repeated, hastening to bar the door against the quickening wind. But when he turned around, the man was still in the centre of the room, sniffing the air suspiciously.

The priest sniffed too and immediately wished that he hadn't. The filth that stained his guest's rags also greased the air with a foul, sickly sweet stench. The odour had great intensity and reminded the old man of some of his riper charges.

None but a lunatic could live with such an odour, the priest decided unhappily. Then, as cautious as a man testing the heat of a stove, he placed a hand on the madman's shoulder and steered him towards a stool.

'We'll take a drink,' he said soothingly. 'Then you can tell me what brings you here.'

After a moment's hesitation, the foul smelling stranger grunted his agreement and slung something from his back. At first the priest had taken it to be a beggar's bedroll, but now he could see that it was a weapon.

At least he assumed that it was a weapon. What else could it be? The great polished lump of stained timber that served as a stock looked to belong to a crossbow, its smooth curves designed to rest easily against a man's shoulder. On the top of this familiar shape, though, taking the place of the crossbow's arms, there was nothing but a simple barrel of blue steel. As long and as thick as a man's thigh it glinted dangerously in the firelight, its muzzle flared open in a toothless snarl.

It had a strange smell, too. An acrid, sulphur smell that was even sharp enough to cut through the rank stench of its owner.

'Here,' the priest said, pulling the threadbare blanket from his cot and throwing it to his guest. 'Sit you down.'

'Thanks,' he muttered, his accent harsh and guttural. 'And why not, hey? Why not be comfortable for the last few hours?'

'Why not, indeed?' the priest agreed, studiously ignoring the emotion in his guest's voice. At least the man was talking.

Deciding to take the risk of turning his back on him, he went to rummage in the cell's single cupboard, listening to the squeak of his stool beneath the stranger's weight all the while.

'Ha! Here it is.' A smile eased the spare lines of the old man's face as he produced a fat bottle of glazed clay and two pots. He poured out two generous measures,

passed one across to his guest and took a seat.

'Drink,' he said.

Again the man grunted his thanks. He drained the cup in one deep draught, lowered it and peered into the dregs that remained. Gradually, as if in response to something he'd seen there, a glistening tear slid down a pale scar and disappeared into the bristles of his moustache.

'Give me your pot,' the priest said. He poured another measure and waited until his guest took it. 'You did well to survive the trap.'

For a split second the stranger froze, his drink held halfway to his lips. Then, in an explosion of movement that sent his stool spinning away and the cup rolling across the table he was on his feet, a dagger sprouting downwards from his left fist.

'What do you know about it?' he snarled, baring strong yellow teeth as he edged forward.

The priest slowed his breathing, unclenched his fists. For a second he watched the patterns the fire made in the razor sharp steel that quivered beneath his chin. He forced himself to look away, to look instead into the crazed eyes of his tormentor.

A lunatic, a beast at bay, he thought, not without a touch of pity.

'I know only what I see,' he said, marshalling his words as carefully as a surgeon would his tools. 'With those weapons and those scars you'd find it hard to pass for a civilian. Your obviously a gentleman of fortune. You're garb's worth more gold than I see in a year.'

'Perhaps. But...'

'And you've recently been set upon,' the priest hurriedly continued. 'That much is obvious. A man whose bearing and profession speaks of a proud nature wandering the night dressed in those rags? No. I'll wager that two days ago those tatters were good enough to wear in any court.'

The soldier lowered his knife uncertainly as his host pressed home his advantage.

'As for the trap, well, what bandit would run into the jaws of that weapon of yours? It must have been a trap. Anyway, there have been no battles hereabouts of late.'

'Haven't there?' the man asked contemptuously.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the mad energy deserted him. The rage bled away from his features, leaving in its place a terrible exhaustion. Sheathing his dagger, the man recovered his stool and sat back down with a sigh.

'My apologies,' he muttered half-heartedly, and shrugged.

'Accepted,' the priest nodded. He recovered his guest's pot and refilled it. 'Why don't you tell me your name?'

'Otto van Delft,' he said, a trace of pride straightening his back. The priest wasn't surprised to find that he had one of Karl Franz's subjects on his hands. That would explain his manners.

'And what brings you to the shrine?' he asked warily. 'You're healthy, strong. What do you want of Morr?'

'I'll tell you,' Otto said.

He peered into the depths of the fire, the flames burnishing his grimy features with a dozen shades of light and darkness. For a while he was silent, listening to the crackle of wood settling in the fireplace and the muted complaints of the rising wind that now lay siege outside.

Finally he took a deep drink and began. 'What do you know of the ratvolk?'



KATVOLK?

'Yes, the ratvolk. The skaven.' Otto turned his attention from the fire to the priest and saw him shiver, a reflex that had nothing to do with the draft that slunk around the stone of the old walls.

'So you do know of them.' The soldier smiled grimly. 'Of course you do. Everyone does.'

The priest merely nodded and poured another measure from the jug. This time it was for himself.

'Tell me everything,' he said, and took a drink.

'I have been hunting the vermin all my life. In sewers, swamps, forests. In catacombs of brick and living stone, in lands of fire and ice and skin rotting dampness. And why? Because...'

Otto paused, his brows meeting in sudden suspicion as he studied his host. The priest's slight nod seemed to reassure him.

'Because,' he continued heavily, 'they're part of me, part of all of us. They're the evil that we try to hold at bay, with law and discipline. And I hate them.'

A log, settling in the fireplace, snapped open in a shower of sparks. The two men watched the sudden flare of light for a moment. Only when it had died down did Otto continue.

'I have a reputation. I am a – what did you call it? – a gentleman of fortune. Yes. And like a thousand other gentlemen of fortune, I haggle like a whore for the best price, then throw the money away on ale and women. But unlike them,' he said, leaning forward with a sudden intensity, 'I do what I'm paid for. I keep the battle moving forward. Believe me, priest, that's no easy thing.'

The older man nodded.

'Reputation,' the mercenary sneered, injecting a whole world of contempt into the word. As if in further comment he coughed, hawking up a gob of phlegm that he spat with unerring accuracy into the fire. It hissed and sizzled as he continued.

'Reputation is what you need in my business more than in any other. Wealth I have, but I needed more than one man's gold for what I had in mind. There are rumours, you see, rumours of a city in the south, the heartland of the skaven, the

womb of their race. I wanted backers. I wanted enough men to sweep down into those swamps and tear out the guts of the enemy.'

Otto, his pupils narrowing into twin pinpricks of fanaticism, spat the words out. 'I needed one more war to make that happen. I came so close. Ever heard of Magdeburg?'

'Yes,' the priest said. 'I knew a merchant from there. He made a contribution to the shrine.'

'He wasn't called Gottlieb, was he?'

'No. Why?'

'Gottlieb was the man who hired me. He was the mayor of Magdeburg. Poor bastard.'

Once more Otto drained his pot, once more his host refilled it. This spirit, White Fire the donor had called it, was proving to be very effective at loosening tongues.

'Forty crowns a week,' the mercenary said, 'plus another fifty for a pelt. I let the lads keep the pelt money. That's always the best way. Krinvaller skimmed a little off the top, of course, but not too much.' The mercenary snorted. 'Krinvaller! What an idiot. Still, I liked him. Everyone did. He'd made a great watch captain, lazy and kind hearted. Then Gottlieb launched the rattenkrieg and turned him from a good watch captain into a terrible colonel.'

'The rattenkrieg,' the priest ventured uncertainly, 'is a war against the skaven?'

'That's it. Gottlieb's daughter was taken, you see. She was a pretty girl, by all accounts, apart from a strawberry birthmark on her cheek. Not that that matters. A man's child is his child and always beautiful to him. When she began to wail late one night about things hiding inside her closet, Gottlieb just thought she was having nightmares. Then, one morning... well, there was nothing left of her, just crumpled sheets and a torn scrap of nightdress. The skaven had gnawed their way from the sewers, up between the walls and through the back of her wardrobe. Their tracks were everywhere in the room.'

Van Delft paused, looked reflectively into the fire.

'So Gottlieb went to war. He was winning it, too, even before I got there. I should have known something was wrong. A halfwit doesn't lead a couple of dozen vagabonds down into the deeps and come back victorious. He doesn't come back at all.'

'Oh, gods, I should have known.' Van Delft; face crumpled into a mask of pain and he smacked his palm against his forehead. 'I should have known.'

The priest, his own features carefully composed, wondered if the mercenary was going to break down altogether. But after a few tense moments, he took a long, deep shuddering breath, pulled his hands reluctantly from his face and continued.

'The information we were getting was very good. Before every mission Gottlieb would call us in and give us numbers, deployment, even these maps. Look.' Van Delft reached inside the ruined cloth of his tunic and pulled out a roll of parchments. Even in the uncertain firelight, the wealth of detail remained crystal clear. As well as the multi-coloured inks, which distinguished each tangled strand from its neighbours, each of the cobwebbed lines was beaded with its own peculiar series of dots and dashes. The priest held one up to the flame to admire the workmanship.

'Why are they made of leather?' he asked, rubbing the material between his fingers.

'Because parchment tears.' The mercenary, seized by a sudden fit of shivering, wrapped the blanket tighter across his shoulders. 'I'd never worked with such information before. Usually underground all you have is instinct, smell, hearing. Fear. But with these,' he waved a hand towards the maps, 'we had depths, scale, everything. I should have known.'

'Known what?' the priest blurted out in spite of himself, and immediately regretted his lapse of patience.

His guest noticed the slip and smiled wearily. 'This potcheen of yours seems to be loosening both of our tongues.'

'We'd better take some more then. Give me your pot.' As he poured, he watched his guest's expression harden and guessed that his thoughts were falling back into the depths of the past.

'Ever heard of warpstone?' Otto asked.

The deepening gurgle of a filling cup faltered.

'Yes. When I was a younger man-' he broke off. 'Yes, I've heard of it.'

'You know of its value then?' Otto asked curiously.

'I know of its value to some.'

'So do I. And beneath Magdeburg I saw enough to buy a city. Although no sane man would risk trying to get it.'

'At first,' he continued, 'I thought that the stuff must have been something else, some kind of mould or fungus. I was leading a gang down to a cut-off point when I first saw it, a great twisting seam threading itself through the walls like an artery through a corpse. And that light, that sickly green light! I swear it was pulsing, beating like the heart of some living thing. That light, it made our faces look like...'

He stopped, eyes blank and unseeing, his drink forgotten in his hand.

'It made them look like daemons,' he finished and drained his pot. 'Such wealth was before us. For a moment, a second, I thought that here I'd found my key to the south. Madness of course, the idea of selling the enemy power in order to raise an army against him is insane. Then another thought hit me. Stuck down there, beneath countless tons of rock, with nothing between myself and the darkness except a single flame, I realised what sort of skaven pack must own this territory and just how powerful they must have been. If I'd have had time, I'd have retreated back up and thought things through.'

'You didn't have time?' The priest nudged his guest out of a brief reverie.

'No. That's when the first attack came.'

Wordlessly he held his pot out and wordlessly the priest refilled it.

'It's always the same in the beginning, especially underground. There's always that terrible moment when you realise that you're not imagining things anymore, that what you're hearing is actually real. That's when the air seems to turn to liquid, heavy and tough to breath, even before the stink hits you. The noise is always the same too: the hiss of fur against stone, the scrape of claws, the pattering of feet and the squeals of pain. Even in the seconds before battle those filthy things are snapping and biting at their own kin.'

Van Delft sneered into the depths of the fireplace, his bared teeth gleaming as sharp as a terrier's beneath his moustache. 'They even hate each other.'

This time, when he paused, the priest said nothing and merely sat transfixed.

'The weakest always come first, the slaves and the vanquished. Pathetic creatures these, but crazed with a fear of what's behind more than what is in front. I waited for them to come. I felt fear twisting into terror, felt terror twisting into madness. We waited some more. I thought of the lads behind me and tried to take strength from them. They didn't have it to give, though. All I got was the sound of sobbing and the smell of piss. If their fear hadn't frozen them I've no doubt they would have fled at the first alarm. As it was, they waited until we could see the lice crawling on the enemy. Then I fired Gudrun.'

He reached over to the weapon and ran his fingertips lovingly down from its muzzle to its breech.

'She punched a hole straight through them, stopped the charge with a single smack of blood and shrapnel.'

Van Delft smiled gently and drew the firearm to his chest like a favourite dog. The priest half expected him to pat it.

He did.

'Yes, she cut through them. That's pretty much all I remember. In that battle Sigmar blessed me with the madness.'

The priest, who could well believe it, nodded and said nothing for a long while.

'And was the pack as strong as you feared?'

'No. No, they were nothing. Most of them were crippled with old injuries or disease. The rest were only half grown, or so old that they were toothless. There were even some females. The only one of them that was up to anything was the leader. Now he was something.' The soldier nodded approvingly. 'A great beast, at least as tall as a man, his pelt was almost pure black where it wasn't riven through with scar tissue. And from the tip of his snout to his left ear there was nothing but shiny, pink flesh, studded with a lump of warpstone in the place of his eye. How it flared when we'd cornered him!'

A strange smile lifted the mercenary's moustache. It looked almost nostalgic, as if he were telling the story of nothing more than a boar hunt or a particularly wild party.

'That pelt I took myself. His clan marking – a burning paw – was new to me. I brought him down with nets, put a spear through the arteries in his neck and stood back. Time was I'd have gone in with a knife, but I'm not as young as I was.'

'Taking it easy in your old age,' the priest replied, deadpan.

'Patience wins,' van Delft shrugged, oblivious to the irony. 'I just wished I'd paid heed to him. He must have spent at least five minutes biting at the wire of the mesh, splashing around in his own blood, and all the while shrieking about traitors to the race. I thought he was just trying to curse me, like they do, but...'

Van Delft ran his fingers through his hair and then clutched at his temples. He sighed, the sound barely audible over the distant thrashing of the forest beneath the night winds.

'That was the first of a dozen sweeps. The maps were always right, the numbers were always correct. And all we ever met were the dregs of three different clans. They were sickly things, not the least because they had all been cursed with some sort of fire. It seemed to have swept over them like a plague, leaving the survivors with withered limbs and scorched pelts. I had the idea that they'd pretty much wiped each other out before we'd arrived. I thought I had it all worked out. Then, three nights ago, I realised that I hadn't.'

The bitter snap of his laughter slapped against the stonework, briefly cutting through the distant hiss of the troubled forest. The priest, who had begun to guess at the holocaust that had brought his guest here, shifted uneasily in his seat.

'It was supposed to be one of the easiest patrols yet, just a slash and burn against some breeding chambers. I'd decided to let one of the corporals take over command for this one. Gunter, he was called. He was sharp, canny and not afraid to use his authority, but not reveling in it either. He'd have made a good leader.'

Van Delft's eyebrows furrowed into a deep ravine of sadness. The priest found himself wondering if the mercenary had ever had a family, children of his own. He supposed not.

'Gunter was leading the column to a rendezvous point,' he continued. 'We were dispersed into small groups. It's tough to stop people bunching up for protection, especially underground. All that fear, all that darkness. But I could see that the lads were making an effort. They knew that Gunter was being tested and they wanted him to succeed. In fact, as soon as I saw that, I knew he had succeeded.'

The soldier looked up and saw the question in his host's eyes.

'I needed to know if they'd work for him. That was the test. That was all we were really down there for. I knew there'd

be no sort of fight that night. Thought I knew, anyway.' He shrugged miserably. 'After all we'd swept through most of these catacombs already. The first I knew of what was to befall us was when Krinvaller fell into our midst. We were supposed to be linking up with his party, but he had no men with him now. Nor did he have any weapons and his clothes, all that silk and brocade and gilding that he was so fond of, had been shredded into rags.'

Van Delfts picked absent-mindedly at the ruins of his clothes. 'Hell, at first I didn't even recognise him. I thought he must have been some madman who'd wandered down. It wasn't until he cried out my name that I realised who it was, and even then I wasn't sure. All that bonhomie, that soft arrogance that had flowered in the safety of the light above was gone, bled away by the reality of the deeps. I pitied him, then, a weak man in a terrible place. But before I could reach out to him and reassure him, the enemy struck. The enemy! This time they truly were skaven. Compared to these two, the weak and crippled vermin we'd hunted up until then were nothing.'

'Only two?' the priest asked, uncertainly.

'Yes, only two. And if anything they were even smaller than average, wiry little twists of things. You could see that even beneath the black strips of their camouflage. It didn't matter. They had that energy, you see, that manic sort of power that can gnaw through stone or bend the bars from an asylum window.'

'I'd seen their like a few times before. Usually just a glimpse, a shadow, a chill running down the back of your neck.'

Van Delft lifted the pot to his lips and didn't seem to notice that it was empty. The priest, eyes reflecting the candle light in twin circles of fascination, made no move to refill it.

'Down there, though, they'd thrown off their caution. Desperation had made them drop it, I suppose, the same as they'd dropped everything else that

might have slowed them down. The only steel they carried sparkled in their paws. They'd dropped swords, bandoliers, nets, globes, everything. Sigmar alone knows how Krinvaller had made it this far.'

'They hit him a second after he'd appeared. I was close enough to hear the thud of weapons burying themselves between his ribs. He fell to one knee, his face already twisted with pain from the poison, and reached out towards me. He looked so... surprised.'

A log snapped in the stove and the priest's heart leapt. He silently scolded himself and refilled the two pots.

'I pulled back Gudrun's hammer, but the assassins were already gone, quicker than screams from a nightmare. Then I looked down and realised that Krinvaller was still breathing.'

The mercenary's face hardened and he took a drink.

'I almost finished him there and then. The poison the enemy use, it's truly horrible. The first tears of blood were already flowing from his eyes and nose, and the tremors were flopping him around on the cold stone of the floor, like a fish on the quayside. I'd seen it before, I knew how bad it would get. So I bent down and found the sweet spot beneath his jaw with my knife. But before I could strike it home, he spoke.'

'It wasn't easy for him. Even in the dimness of the lantern light, I could see the muscles in his neck cramping, and when he spoke you could see the soup of his lungs beginning to gurgle up over his teeth.'

The priest grimaced. He asked a question, as much to take his mind off the image van Delft had conjured up as anything.

'What did he say?'

'He said to tell Gottlieb it had all been in vain. But for Sigmar's sake, don't let him look at the maps. He managed to thrust a roll of the damn things into my hands before the final seizure took him.'

'At first I didn't understand what he meant. Delirium, I thought, or the beginnings of insanity. But then I started to wonder again about the excellence of our information and the detail of our maps. Who'd made them? No human, that was for sure. And who was the "she" Krinvaller had been, talking about? Who else could it have been but the girl whose disappearance had sparked this whole damn war?'

Suddenly van Delft sprang to his feet, kicked back his stool and started to pace the room.

'I should have known!' he cried. 'After so many years of cunning and deceit, a lifetime of traps and stratagems. I thought myself so clever! Yet here I was working for the enemy. That's when the true owners of that terrible domain fell upon us. We'd exterminated the last of their rivals, you see. They'd given us those cursed maps and used us as a weapon against the other clans. And now it was our turn. We were already deep into the catacombs by then. Every few yards the passageways split, tangling across each other like tubes in offal. There were so many conduits, that even at that depth, we could feel a faint, moldy breeze. It brought us the first rumours of our doom, this breeze, a secret, whispering sound started to emerge. It seemed to come from everywhere at once, as soft and insistent as a far off ocean.'

'I remember Gunter looking at me, his eyes bright with terror in the darkness, and I knew that it was time to withdraw. Krinvaller was dead, his patrol annihilated and our plans were betrayed. There was nothing to be gained from throwing our own bodies into the jaws of the enemy too. So I sent Gunter down the line to lead the retreat. But before he'd gone a dozen paces the enemy attacked.'

'They spewed out in a great boiling swarm from every passageway, every narrow crevasse, every crack and rat hole that bit into our line. I gave the order to hold, to stand our ground. I think most of the groups heard. Some even obeyed.'

Most of them just broke and fled. I was beyond caring, by then. In the deeps there are no elegant manoeuvres or set piece formations. No bright uniforms or distant hill tops from which to signal your troops. There is only rage and terror and the will to win.'

Van Delft's teeth ground together beneath a tight smile as he absent-mindedly tested the spring on his gun's hammer. The priest could hardly believe the expression of savage joy that now seemed to mark his companions grimy features, but neither could he mistake it for anything else.

Van Delft was obviously a man who loved his job.

'Gudrun here smashed through the first ragged mob that fell upon us,' he continued, oblivious to the priest's stark appraisal. 'And, with the flare of her muzzle flash still blooming in my eyes, I led a charge into the gap she'd opened for us. I hoped to punch through the trap, then turn and fall on their rear. But this time things weren't so easy. This time, when we'd sliced through the front runners, we found stormvermin.'

The mercenary eased the hammer back down and peered thoughtfully into the fireplace. A gust of wind rattled its way beneath the door and sent a brief plume of flames flaring upwards.

'Black they were, and massive. They had teeth like carpenter's chisels and carried heavy, iron bound spears. The blades were clotted with rust and blood, but the edges were sharp enough. They were too much for my lads. As soon as the first of the beasts leapt into the glow of our lamplight, I felt them break behind me, could almost hear their nerves shattering. I dropped a litter of caltrops and bolted after them, vaulting the dead, kicking away the hands of the dying. Thank Sigmar for those poor bastards. If the skaven hadn't stopped to play with them, I wouldn't be here now.'

Van Delft lifted his pot and took a hefty swig. The priest recognised it as a toast, a tribute to those who'd paid so dearly for

their captain's freedom. There was no guilt in the gesture, only a sort of red-eyed celebration.

Morr would have approved.

'There's a real joy to running away. I felt it for the first time as I overtook first one straggler then the next. We were winding blindly through the labyrinth now, recoiling from passageways held by the enemy, cutting through them when we had to. In the haste and the darkness, tripping over the still warm corpses of our comrades or hurtling blindly into sudden, vicious skirmishes, I knew that we were being driven, like sheep to the butcher's. Deeper and deeper we fled, sinking beneath levels not shown on any map. The air became thick and suffocating, so much so that the flames within our lanterns started to choke out. By the time we reached the skaven's slaughterhouse we had only the pulsing green glow of warpstone to guide us.'

'Their slaughterhouse?' the priest asked, leaning forward and pouring them both another drink. He had a feeling they'd need it.

'Yes,' the mercenary muttered, staring for a moment longer into the bright heart of the fire. 'It was a chamber, as round the cathedral at Quierms. And huge, perhaps a quarter-of-a-mile across.

I recognised it for what it was as soon as we reached it. It was the bones that gave it away. They covered the floor as far as the eye could see, a great crunching carpet of them. There were bats there, too, fluttering around amongst the stalactites. I didn't look at them too closely. The warpstone seemed to have done something to them. Something horrible. The last of the survivors stumbled in behind me, and we started off across the bone yard. But we had nowhere to go. There was only one entrance, and every minute more skaven poured through it, as thick as sewage from a pipe.'

'I called the lads while we were still in range, reloaded Gudrun, and took aim. At that, the ratvolk started to scurry away,

the great mass of them opening up before Gudrun's gaze. I thought that it was because of their cowardice, but I was wrong. They weren't fleeing from me. They were fleeing from the things that were approaching from behind them. At first, the monsters hardly seemed to be skaven at all. They seemed too bulky, for one thing. They were wearing masks, too. Great leather things with brass muzzles and round glass eyes.' He took another swig of drink.

'Then, glinting in the warplight, I noticed the tangle of pipes and tubes that the first members of this bizarre procession carried and a new terror of something far worse than death gripped me. I'd seen these weapons before. I remembered the hunched bearers, spines bent beneath great tarred barrels that carried liquid death. I remembered the tubes and steel snouts that splayed outwards from the fuel tanks. And I remembered the burning horror.'

The storyteller shuddered, and snatched for his pot. He drank deeply, then met his host's eyes. Almost defiantly, he said: 'I know that this sounds like madness, priest, but some of the skaven have learned how to torture fire into a horrible new form. Green, it is, and closer to liquid than the honest blaze in your grate. I've seen it leap and flow, surging forward from their infernal contraptions like water from a hose. I've seen it feasting upon skin, then flesh, and then bone. I've seen it melt armour and stone, or slip cunningly between them to seek out the soft flesh beyond. And I've seen men devoured inch by inch, driven insane by the agony.'

'Down there, in the killing pen in which we'd been cornered, I knew that I couldn't face that horror again. I raised Gudrun's cold muzzle to the hollow beneath my chin and tightened my finger on the trigger. The ratvolk saw it and rushed to ignite their weapons. One of them produced a flaring sulphur match from its filthy rags and held it warily in front of the nozzle. I pressed harder on

the trigger, but still the hammer remained locked. The first faint mist started to roll from the burnt black muzzle of the fire thrower, and I pulled harder. Still, no matter how I pulled on the trigger, Gudrun wouldn't fire.'

I glanced down to check the mechanism but then, with a hiss of frying air, the skaven's weapon blossomed into hideous life. A great ball of writhing flame belched out of the machine and rolled towards me, towards us all. But it never arrived. Instead there was a metallic shriek and the fire was sucked back into the very contraption that had given birth to it. By the gods, you should have heard the ratvolk squeal when they saw what was happening. Some of them turned to run but got jammed in the passageway, others tried to swat out the flame with their paws and when they caught light... well, lets just say it was a glorious moment.'

Van Delft smiled at the priest. He seemed not to notice that the old man wasn't smiling back.

'It only lasted for a moment, though,' he continued. 'As the enemy's fire turned upon itself, the cavern erupted into a flash of light and darkness. I can still see it now, when I close my eyes. The thousands of fangs bared in terror, the thousands of widening eyes gleaming as bright as stars, then melting like wax. Then the very earth shifted uneasily, as if disturbed by the foul beasts that crawled within its depths and I heard the first rumble of falling stone. And then... and then nothing.'



VAN DELFT GROUNDED to a halt. The priest studied his haggard features, the pallor of his skin. The two high red blotches on the sharp angles of his cheekbones had little to do with the jug of potcheen they'd drunk. The mercenary

looked exhausted, stretched to his limits. But for all that, the madness that had gleamed in his eyes when he'd arrived seemed to have passed. Perhaps the telling of his tale had been the cure he'd needed. The priest had seen it happen before. Sometimes words could drain the poison from a man's soul, just as leeches could sometimes drain infection from a wound.

The old man poured the last of the potcheen into his guest's pot and sat back. He noticed that the first grey fingers of dawn were creeping between the timbers of his door.

'That was two days ago, maybe more, maybe less,' van Delft shrugged. 'As far as I know, I alone survived the holocaust. And now I am finished. My reputation is in tatters. My dreams died with the corpses I left behind me. There's not a man in this land who'll give me a command after Magdeburg.'

'What will you do?' the priest asked softly.

'I will finish my contract. I still have gold for black powder, snares and nets. I'll go to Magdeburg, eat and sleep for a final few days. Then return to the deeps. Amongst such rivers of warpstone the enemy will never be far from reach.'

'Ah. Now I understand your errand, I think. But you can't be shriven now. I can only offer Morr's blessing to those who near his realm, and you aren't, not really. I can't.'

'No. Not me. Them,' van Delft said, gesturing to the bed where the priest had thrown the maps. 'Them.'

'I don't know about that,' he said, duty warring with caution, as he considered what a grisly treasure hunt that would be. 'Anyway, I thought that you said the bodies were buried beneath...'

The squeak of the opening door distracted the priest from his dilemma and he looked up to see that van Delft had let himself out. Gathering his robe about him, the old man followed him out into the chill grey light of the dawn.

'Where are you going? Stay here and rest, eat.'

Van Delft, who'd already reached the liche gate, stopped and turned back. He looked suddenly younger. Perhaps it was no more than a trick of the morning light.

'No. I have work to do. As do you. But Priest?'

'Aye?'

'Thank you.'

And with that he was gone.

The older man watched him disappear into the mist. Then, with a shiver, he returned to the warmth of his cell.

He threw another log into the stove, straightened the chair and rolled his blankets up. Then he picked up the maps van Delft had left him. The columns and lines that tattooed the soft leather remained clear and untouched by the hell their owner had been through, the leather still supple and well oiled. The priest picked up one at random, smoothing it out on the flat of his thigh. Although the square of its shape was slightly misshapen the texture was smooth, finer than any leather he'd worn before. The priest held it up to the light that spilled in through the doorway, tilting it this way and that against the shadows that still haunted the room.

The detail really was incredible. But now that he looked, there was one flaw. It was a single, strawberry shaped smudge on the corner of one of them. The priest picked up the next one and found another imperfection. This one consisted of an arc of little curled hairs, golden blonde in the gathering sunlight.

The next one was marred by a little indentation in the centre. An inverted button of leather, perhaps as big as his fingertips, the skin within had been compacted into swirls.

The priest ran his thumb over it, wondering what it reminded him off.

A rose, perhaps.

No. No, that wasn't it. It was something less fragile.

Ah yes, of course. It was just like a belly button.

Just like a...

The potcheen soured in his stomach. His hands began to shake. Reluctantly the old man looked back at the unusual leather of these maps.

Looked at the belly button that marked one.

The birthmark that blemished another.

The eyebrows that furrowed one edge of a third.

And he realised that van Delft had brought him the remains of a body to be shriven, after all.



OUTSIDE, THE MIST gave way to drizzle, which in turn gave way to the warmth of the sun. It warmed the fields and the cemetery and the stones of the shrine. It shone golden on the wet ivy and sent flights of sparrows wheeling up into the sky, born aloft by the joy of their lives.

The priest, the rites of death completed, watched them. They scattered across the blue vault of the sky, tiny little sparks of happiness born up the warm, southerly wind that whispered gently through the greens of the forest below. He took a deep breath of clean air, only slightly scented now with the smoke of the funeral pyre and smiled as the first of the sparrows descended, drawn by the sight of the bread in his hand.

'Yes, little friend,' he told it as it hopped forwards. 'This world is a beautiful place.'

He pursed his lips as it flew away. Then softly, as if he didn't want the bird to hear him, the priest added the single word:

'Sometimes.'

Words of Magic

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR EXAMINES THE MYSTERIOUS LANGUAGE OF WIZARDS AND THOSE STEEPED IN THE ARCANE LORE OF MAGIC, WITH RELEVANT PICTORAL REFERENCES.

The image of a magister, swathed in the shifting robes of his order and chanting the syllables of some strange and arcane language, is famous throughout this good Empire. I imagine that many who have lived within our Empire's great cities have met or seen a spell-caster such as I describe, while the peasants and farmers of the countryside will undoubtedly know of them from a thousand folktales and legends.

And yet, such is the commonality of this image in life, literature and folktale, it seems somewhat odd to me that so few seem to question it. We non-magisters seem to take it as written that spell-casters must use strange and arcane languages to cast their spells; but why is this? Why do spell-casters, of all kinds, use strange and occult languages to enact their conjurations? Is Reikspiel not sufficient for spell-casting? And if not, why not? Perhaps this seems like a minor consideration to the casual reader, but I believe it to be a fundamental question as to the nature of magic and spell-casting.

According to my esteemed colleague and friend, Magister Patriarch Verspasian Kant of the College of Light, a spell is the process by which a magister, sorcerer, or any other magic-user, binds Aethyric energy to his will and sculpts it into a definite form with a specific purpose. Magister Kant maintains that a spell, at its most basic, is the imposition of mortal will and certainty upon the infinite possibility and uncertainty of Aethyric energy (most often called magic). For, he says, the Aethyr and the 'energy' that forms it is the metaphysical existence of infinite and raw potential, or perhaps more specifically, the existence of infinite, unfulfilled and largely unrealised potential. To Magister Kant, the Aethyr is both the 'Potential Reality' that is the opposite of what he describes as the 'Actual Reality' of the Mortal Realms, and is also the catalyst for, and by-product of, all change and growth within the Mortal Realms.

Magister Kant goes on to say that it is precisely because of the Aethyr's complete opposition to the Mortal Realms that the

Aethyr's energies are drawn to the certainties of their mortal opposites. This is perhaps related to the reason why mortals are drawn so acutely to the uncertainties of dreams, possibility and therefore magic. Indeed, Magister Kant believes that the one certainty of the Aethyr is that as a natural product of its existence it seeks to draw its opposites, (being reason, purpose and certainty) unto itself, and thereby fulfil, or at least realise, the infinite and unrealised potential that it is formed from. This is demonstrated most obviously when Aethyric energy seeps into the Mortal Realms and acquires for itself laws and provisos that it almost certainly does not possess within the infinite uncertainty of the Aethyr. For example, its refraction into the eight colours of magic as soon as it crosses the metaphysical boundaries between the Metaphysical and Physical Realms.

But, just as Aethyric energy is drawn to, and seeks to interact with, the physicality and actuality of the Mortal Realms, it also pulls concept unto itself, and so it is that spell-casting can come to be. Magister Kant is suggesting that the art of binding magic and casting a spell is the art of imposing a definite idea or concept upon the entirely indefinite and chaotic potential that is the Aethyr and its energy, with the goal of harnessing that force, to achieve the specific end that is encapsulated within the concept of the spell.

To postulate within the paradigm proposed by Magister Kant, one could say that, despite the fact the force we call magic is drawn to physical things and seeks to interact with them, it is still entirely random and uncertain in its nature. Although will and intellect can gather, bind, and order magic into a spell, magic is so diffusive and powerful that it takes very specific and crystalline thoughts, concepts and directions to bind it,^o without leaving any loophole through which it can seep out and therefore ruin the spell. If the concept of any given spell could be considered a kind of metaphysical container, then magic naturally flows towards the weakest point in the container. So spells must be absolutely precise in structure and specific

in purpose, otherwise the magic begins to unbind itself and run amok.

To prevent this from happening, spellcasters must use incredibly specific formulae to bind and weave magic into spells – formulae that leave no room at all for the magic to leak free. In order to create these flawless conceptual traps to bind magic, I have learnt that the magisters of the Colleges of Magic use a language they call the ‘lingua praestantia’ to enunciate their spells – a language that was taught to them by none other than that great High Mage of myth and history, the founder of the Great Colleges of Magic, Teclis of Ulthuan.

Though it is said to be an even more complicated language than the tonal language of distant Cathay, I am told that the lingua praestantia still only a simplified and dialectical version of the Asur’s own language, Eltharin, which is in itself is fabled to be a devolved and very simplified version of the language spoken by those ancient, godlike beings the Asur call the ‘Old Ones’, or at least so Magister Kant tells me. It is worth noting that many of the blasphemous texts, which I have been forced to read in the course of this investigation, have suggested that the language spoken by these near mythical sorcerer-mystics is in fact Anoqeyān, the language that, according to legend, is spoken by both gods and daemons. If this is true, then the language that our good Empire’s sanctioned magisters use to cast their spells is related to the hellish language of daemons, and also the divine language of the gods – a shocking realisation indeed, at least for a man of faith such as myself.

However, the relationship between these languages must surely be a tenuous one, and there is considerable debate amongst the scholars of the Colleges of Magic as to whether these ‘Old Ones’ (if they existed at all), learnt their language from the gods and daemons of the Aethyr, or vice-versa. For

himself, Magister Kant believes that Anoqeyān was indeed the creation of these ‘Old Ones’, and that they were the first and only beings to fully identify and quantify every single thing, state and process within the mortal plane of existence, and almost every single thing, state and process that was possible through and in the Aethyr. In addition to this, Magister Kant also believes that Anoqeyān, the divine-tongue, has a life of its own, contracting and expanding with every dream and every thought, of any and all mortals and immortals, even as the Aethyr does.

I cannot comment on these assertions. Before I began this investigation into the ways and means of gods and daemons, I, like the vast majority of the academic community, had assumed that Anoqeyān was just a myth. However, if Magister Kant is correct in his beliefs regarding the lingua praestantia and its genealogy, I think it could be said that to possess a knowledge, of even a considerably devolved and dialectical version, of Anoqeyān (as the lingua praestantia is said to be), would denote a grasp of concepts and processes that are otherwise, unknown or inexpressible, in and through, the mortal languages – hence the lingua praestantia’s pre-eminence as the language of spell-casting, precisely because it is so exhaustively specific.



CONCERNING THE LINGUA PRAESTANTIA

Even the simplest word of the lingua praestantia is incredibly complex. Whatever the enchantment, shadings of rhythm, accent, pitch, duration, volume, timbre, and so many other factors, govern a host of critical elements, any of which, if enunciated incorrectly, will certainly spoil the effect of the spell. Only the rarest individual with the combined gifts of the voice and ear of a temple choir soloist and the intelligence, memory, and wit of the finest scholar can hope to master the subtle chords of the lingua praestantia.

Further, a magister must have also been blessed with a powerful Aethyric organ (known variously as the 'Mind' or 'Psyche'), so that he can bind the resonance of the words to the shifting winds of magic, and thereby produce the desired magical effect. For most would-be spell-casters, this Aethyric component of the lingua praestantia is hardest to master, but excellence in this exercise is the crucial difference between the lowly hedge-wizard who uses mundane language and primitive psychical techniques to cast the simplest of spells, and the more puissant practitioners of the Arcane Arts that study and teach within our Empire's great colleges.

- Vespasian Kant, Magister-Patriarch of the College of Eight

UNPACKING THE LINGUA PRAESTANTIA

In the following piece I shall look at some of the basic syntax, grammar and vocabulary of the lingua praestantia, bearing in mind that, even were I to know more than just the rawest basics of this arcane language (which I do not), I have neither the time nor the space here to investigate it to the degree that would do this immensely complicated language justice. Indeed, without actually hearing these words spoken by someone truly proficient in the language, it is unlikely that the one would be able to grasp the very precise and musical nature of its pronunciation just by reading the following guide.

The more widely educated amongst those scholars who read this piece might well detect similarities between various aspects of the lingua praestantia and the languages of the Dawi and Asur, not to mention the various dialects of the so-called 'Dark Tongue' spoken by the multifarious followers of Chaos. Whether this relation owes more to the common ancestry of these languages (in relation to Anoqeyān), or because of some kind of 'cross pollination' between the languages of the dwarfs, elves, and the arcane language of the Empire's Magisters, is anyone's guess.

Though not quite as complex as Eltharin, each individual word of the lingua praestantia encompasses a myriad of associated meanings and concepts. It is undoubtedly for this reason that the lingua praestantia is the most appropriate language of spell-casting and ritual amongst the vast majority of spell-casters in the Old World. A less specific language (like our own Reikspiel) has far less power to evoke and control the mystic forces of the Aethyr, and leaves more room for error while a spell is being cast.

The lingua praestantia is rich in words and phrases that express the mystical, arcane and complex cosmology of both the mortal universe and the Aethyr. Although it is convenient to attach basic meanings to these words (as indeed I have done in the following section of this investigation), each and every one of them is imbued with far greater and deeper significance. Indeed, depending on the context of the sentence or ritual that they are referenced within, many of the core words of the lingua praestantia can have more than one meaning – meanings that might seem contradictory.

In addition to this, the lingua praestantia is a largely agglutinative language, which means that the meaning of each of the root words can be altered by the addition of prefixes and suffixes to bring out the various more esoteric references, tenses, contexts and subtexts locked within them.

There are many different sounds in the alphabet of the lingua praestantia that are used in our everyday usage of Reikspiel, or in most of the other languages and dialects of our beloved Empire. Yet I have been told that, despite the complexities involved in pronouncing the syllables of the lingua praestantia, even they are as nothing next to some of the other dialectical derivatives of Anoqeyān, some of which are said to possess as many consonant and vowel sounds as the mortal tongue and vocal chords can generate, and indeed some that the mortal tongue and vocal chords cannot.

It is for this reason that I have included spellings using the phonetic alphabet devised by the Magisters of the Colleges of Magic (based around the familiar alphabet of Reikspiel), of some the most common sounds used within the lingua praestantia. Correct pronunciation of phrases is of paramount importance for the successful casting of spells, or, at least, so I have been told. Here follow the most commonly used letters of the Magisters' phonetic alphabet with a pronunciation guide:

VOWEL SOUNDS:

- '**a**' – as said in 'as'
- '**ä**' – said like the 'a' in 'harm'
- '**å**' – short, said like the 'u' in 'cut'
- '**e**' – as said in 'yes'
- '**i**' – as said in 'imp'
- '**ö**' – short, as said in 'hot'
- '**ö**' – said like the 'er' in 'thinker', only more stretched.
- '**ø**' – very short, said like the 'oo' in 'good'
- '**u**' – short, said a bit like the 'oo' in 'too'
- '**œ**' – said like the 'ee' in 'sleep'

CONSONANT SOUNDS:

- '**b**' – soft, as said in 'battle'
- '**c**' – said like the 'j' in 'jewel'
- '**ç**' – said like the 'ch' in 'champion'
- '**f**' – soft, as said in 'frenzy'



'g' – hard, as said in 'great'

'h' – as said in the word 'hate', but pronounced a bit harder and shorter.

'j' – said like the 's' in 'pleasure'

'k' – hard, said like the 'c' in 'cut'

'p' – hard, as said in 'peasant'

'q' – a tricky one. A short, hard glottal sound made right at the back of the throat. The natives of northern Albion use a similar sound in their word 'loch', only the phonetic 'q' is a much more abrupt and deep sound, generated further back in the throat. If you imagine that the 'ch' sound in 'loch' is a series of harsh, breathy 'k's' strung together, the phonetic 'q' would be a bit like the very first of those 'k's'.

'r' – pronounced by vibrating the tongue against the roof of the mouth, just as the Tileans and Estalian say it.

's' – sibilant, pronounced as a double 's', like at the end of the word 'possess'

'š' – pronounce like the 'sh' in 'shaman'

't' – hard, as said in 'tempt'

'θ' – said like the 'th' in 'thought'

'_' – hard, said like the 'th' in 'their'

'v' – hard, similar to how it is said in 'vengeance', only harsher and fractionally longer.

'w' – very soft, said a bit like the 'w' in 'weather', but even softer and shorter.

'x' – exactly like the 'ch' in 'loch'

'y' – soft, as said in 'yes'

'z' – hard, pronounced like the first double 's' in 'possess', or the last 's' in 'because'

A FEW KEY TERMS AND THEIR MOST BASIC MEANINGS

Qeyos (Chaos / Khaos) – (lit.) spirit energy; psychical power; magic.

Contextual variations – potential; 'Oversoul'; abode of the gods; the Sea of Souls; the 'Afterlife'; the Aethyr; Paradise; Hell.

Feyos (Phaos) – (lit.) 'Soul'

Contextual variations – breath; essence; instinct; holy; the unconscious inner being; the subconscious; anima.

Deyos (Dhaos) – (lit.) Spirit entity

Contextual variations – deity; daemon; divine messenger; of divine (or daemonic) nature or origin; immaterial or incorporeal; of the mind; consciousness; will; purpose; that which mediates between the inner realms of the mind and the outer realms of the physical world; ego; animus.

Qär (Khar) – (lit.) Rage

Contextual variations – anger; fury; frenzy; hate; to destroy; to abominate; the will to cause and inflict violence; 'violence' itself; the need, desire and instinct to survive; the will to dominate.

Tzœn (Tzeen) – (lit.) Change

Contextual variations – inconstancy; to alter; 'then'; the will to change; to look towards or pursue the future; the fear of stasis; the rejection of 'now'; the desire to be different; randomness; chance; hope.

Nurg (Nurgh) – (lit.) Decay

Contextual variations – deteriorate; decompose; rot; 'now'; acceptance of the 'now'; the realisation of what 'is'; to deny the possibility of improvement; acceptance of decay; cynicism; to fall from grace; desperation; the abandonment of hope; despair.

Slä (Slaa) – (lit.) Pleasure

Contextual variations – gratification; delight; ecstasy; rapture; exaltation; the desire to experience pleasure; sensation; the desire or need to 'feel'; the pursuit of happiness or perfection; selfishness; vanity; pride; joy.

Leø, nes (Leth, neth) – 'Lord of'; 'Master of'; 'Ruler of'.

Contextual variations – 'cause of'; 'source of'; 'embodiment of'; 'creation of'.

THUS:

The meaning of each Chaos god's name reflects the complexity of His or Her divine nature. Here follow just a few examples:

Qär'nes – **1.** (lit.) Rage Lord, **2.** The Source of Hate. **3.** The Embodiment of Violence.

Tzœn'nes – **1.** (lit.) Change Lord. **2.** The

Source of Hope. **3.** The Embodiment of Chance.

Nurg'les – **1.** (lit.) Decay Lord. **2.** The Source of Despair. **3.** The Embodiment of Cynicism.

Slä'nes – **1.** (lit.) Pleasure Lord. **2.** The Source of Sensation. **3.** The Embodiment of Selfishness.

SIMPLE ORDERS, STATEMENTS AND QUESTIONS:

Te§ = Yes **an** = No

Mörän = Stop **Geder** = Continue

Ged = Go **Gi§** = Come

Ase = Who **Yek** = Bring

Ölen = What **Zök** = Take

Ölaren = When **Fiç** = Give

Var§ = Where **Cå** = Throw / Cast

Nelaw = Why **Telän** = Accept

COLOURS AND SHADES:

Aq§i = Red

Orç = Orange

Azir = Blue

Xamön = Yellow

Giran = Green

Sliv = Pink

§yis = Purple

Gur = Brown

Ulgu = Grey

Dar = Black / Dark

Hyi§ = White

Qay§ = Spectrum / Iridescent / Multicoloured

SOME COMMON WORDS AND TERMS:

Please note that it would be unwise to experiment with the pronunciation of the following words out loud, for, as much as these words form part of a language and seem innocuous enough

as they are written upon the page, every one of them is imbued with hidden meanings and subtle power. To one who possesses an affinity for, and with, the winds of magic, and knows how to concentrate his or her mind to the task of spell-casting, these words will attract, focus and sculpt raw magic more successfully than most other tongues – often in unforeseen ways.

You have been advised.

Aleri = Plains

Alum = Light (as in luminescence)

Alu = Deny

Ankir = Domain

Aq§i'oy = Bronze or copper

Arian = Woman

Asärmin = Keeper



Ata = Death

Atax = Die

Atem = the Sun

Avel = Heart

Älørey = Doom

Bäj = Oath	Leøen = Storm	Sinøiy = Loyal
Cerd = Heal	Lil'yes = Arcane	Slä = Pleasure
Çarik = Endure	Liad = Music	Soraq§i = Fire / Flame
Çeyl = Order / Law	Li'gur = Mud	Sorfäk = Heat
Dahazirek - the Sky / Celestial	Lowik = Laugh	Sorir = Hot
Dahqay§ - Rainbow	Manan'ek = The Ocean / Sea	Sorira§ = Molten
Darfäk = Darkness	Mäj = Spell / Enchantment	Soroy = Eternity
Darhan = Night	Mäjay = Wizard / Spell-Caster	Sölda = Purify
Derô = Remember / Memory	Mär = Steel	§alay = Mercy
Deyos = Spirit	Menli = Life	§amel = Visible
Drahay = Dragon	Minaø = Skill	§amelna = Invisible
Erhan = Shadow	Mör = End	§amelna'a§ek = body of water / lake
Feyos = Soul	Möray = Fate	Täl = Wild
Gor = Beast or animal	Nurg = Decay	Te = And
Gorem = Steed, or beast of burden	Öriak§ = Blood	Tzœn = Change
Grân = Artisan	Pä = Look / See	Øalu = Vengeance
Heg = Crone or decrepit	Qaderô = Remembering	älädi = Monarch
Hoys = Wisdom	Qamär = Weapon	Ulgute = Mist or Fog
Hyi§ete = Smoke	Qasarat = Defying	Ulrax = Savage
Hyi§fäk = Whiteness	Qasinaø = Dying	Urak = Enemy
Iøil = Star	Qasoraq§i = Burn / burning	Vlay = House or Home
I§eh = Mother	Qär = Rage	Verne = Justice
Je = Man	Qeyin = Murder	Völ = Manufacture / Cast
Jedå = Father	Qeyos = Magic	Xamön'oy = Gold / golden
Kadasø = Grace	Qeyossaris = Magic/Chaos Moon	Yanla = Balance
Kisøn = Knowledge	Ruwun = Rune / Letter / Word	Zern = Plateau
Koyl = Tear (as in 'crying')	Reyha = Nature (as in flora and fauna)	
Kreyn = Book / Scroll	Sarat = Defy	
Krimner = Warrior	Saratfäk = Defiance	
Kurnas = Hunter	Saris = the Moon	
Laçey = Noble	Sæsey = Fly	
Laço = Glory	Senlayi = Swift	
	Sinaø = Silence	

When the Powers speak, the Universe listens, for the Universe is little more than Form imposed upon Chaos, or the Realisation of Potential. The image of that Form, the expression of that Realisation, is determined through action, consciousness, and will, represented in the unimaginably complex Great Language of Gods and Daemons, known to mortals as Anodeyan.

The incalculable powers of Gods are in one (admittedly simplistic) sense a reflection of the fact that they are personifications of concepts, and therefore the gods are actually manifestations of broad areas of the divine language, in the sense that the language itself is the result of conceptualisation. For example, mercy is an action and abstract with no identity until it is actually named 'Mercy', and the attributes of what makes mercy are expressed, codified and debated - so one might say it is with the gods.

Metaphysical Vortices of rage or despair may form in the Empyrean as mortal beings experience these feelings, but I believe that these Vortices are blind and devoid of identity and independent will until intelligent beings in the Mortal Realms become self aware enough to analyse their own raw feelings, bind them into concepts by assigning them names and identifying their attributes, and thereby give these emotions, and by direct association their Vortices within the Empyrean, an identity separate from the actual mortal experience of them.

The Lesser Powers of the Empyrean, like daemons and devils, are smaller and ever more specific embodiments of concept and emotion, and therefore have a more modest facility and capacity for the divine language, and correspondingly more modest magical abilities -- at least in comparison with their divine masters. I doubt even the greatest of the fabled 'Old Ones' and their most gifted pupils, the Asur magi of prehistory, had more than a baby's babbling comprehension of this language, so impossibly vast and complex it is.

But even with that primitive comprehension they were undoubtedly the mightiest sorcerers of all time. With our command of Anodeyan, as expressed through its over-headans, the Pensae praestantia, we the greatest and most powerful practitioners of the arcane arts within the Empire are little better than parrots mimicking the speech of men. Yet even so, our powers are the source of awe and wonder amongst all the peoples of the world who have seen or heard of us - and rightly so.

~ extracted from the third letter of Magister Volans, First Supreme Patriarch of the Colleges of Magic

AS DEAD AS FLESH

BY NICK KYME

BACK! BACK INTO the ground!' Mikael cried, driving his sword into the zombie's gut.

Impaled upon the blade, the undead monster hissed and snarled at the templar, reaching out with filthy claws. There was a horrible sucking sound as it dragged itself along the blade, cold steel slipping effortlessly through its rotten innards. It raked a filth-encrusted talon across Mikael's face, tearing a long and bloody gash. Snarling in pain, he ripped the thing in two, wrenching his sword through paper skin. The legs and torso spiralled away as grave dust fell from the corpse like rain.

Strong fingers seized Mikael's shoulder from behind. Hard and sharp, they felt like burning knives as they bit through his armour plate. About to turn, another thing loomed out of the half-dark of the wooden chapel in front of him. Once a butcher, it now had the shambling gait of the undead. It still wore a blood-stained tabard, but the head was caved in and wasted muscle peeked out beneath torn and greying skin. It lunged at him, arms outstretched. Mikael slashed at it, removing an arm, dead blood spattering his neck and face. The creature behind him grabbed at his sword-arm, pushing it down with groping, scraping fingers. The undead butcher pressed forward, reaching out with a claw-like hand, an incoherent moan escaping from its lipless mouth. Mikael grabbed its wrist in a gauntleted

fist and broke it. Undeterred, it came at him, snarling teeth - blackened nubs of wasted bone - bared and lunging for his face.

Mikael recoiled. A decaying hand held his ankle. A pox-ridden stable lad, the zombie he had cut in two, dragged its torso along the stone floor. It seized upon the templar's leg, biting at his armoured greaves.

Legs buckling, Mikael tried to resist the burden upon his arms and chest. Sickly morning light seeping through the stained-glass windows was all but eclipsed as a wall of rotten flesh engulfed him. He tried to roar out in defiance, to summon his courage, but a filthy hand filled his mouth. Panic welled within as his armour cracked against the pressure...

Light pierced the dark, as Reiner smashed the one-armed zombie aside with a deft blow from his broadsword. The templar captain drove after it zealously as it floundered in a crumpled heap of bent and twisted limbs, and severed off its head with a brutal swipe.

The fingers clawing at Mikael's back and sword-arm were pulled away as the gnawing claustrophobic dread ebbed, nails, still embedded into his shoulder plates, torn from their fingers. Halbranc was behind him and hefted one of the wretched creatures up above his head, a woman, withered and grey, eyes long since decayed from their sockets. She clawed at the huge knight, a morose wail keening in Mikael's ears as she

ripped a long tear in his cloak. Halbranc ignored it and smashed her into the cold stone floor, neck and spine shattering audibly. Mikael held the creature beneath him, stamping hard upon its neck. He crushed its rotten skull with a heavy boot.

Within the dingy chapel, his comrades fought. The place was worn with age, wood cracked and warped. The windows threw murky, dawn light through tarnished glass onto a bloody vista. Valen was bleeding. An ugly ragged wound split his shoulder through his armour padding, the plate-mail long since ripped away. He held his sword waveringly; eyes misted and cold, slumped against a wooden stall. Kalten, and his brother, Vaust who wore a pained expression – left arm tucked tight into his body – protected him. A clutch of undead farm workers armed with rusted scythes and rakes surrounded them.

A cry echoed from the back of the chapel. Mikael recognised the powerful voice of Sigson as he peered through the gloom.

'In the name of Morr, I compel you, return!'

The warrior priest held a gleaming vial aloft. Its contents shimmered as he uttered a prayer to their god and cast it hard at the foul pack harrying the three templars. The vial exploded into the creatures, dousing them with the blessed water within. Long dead flesh burned against the anointed liquid with a shallow hiss, as a foul stench filled the room. Sigson held his breath against the stink and waded in to finish them through clouds of vile smoke.

Another vial shimmered in his hand, but before he could throw it, a creature, nought but a desiccated skeleton, sprang out beneath the stalls and cut a deep wound in Sigson's stomach, piercing his steel breastplate. Sigson cried out, dropping the vial, blessed water eking through stone cracks as the glass shattered. He hacked down at the beast with his sword, but the weapon jarred in its collar bone. The zombie cut a deep slash across his exposed shoulder as he fought to get his sword free.

Sigson fell to his knees. The zombie loomed down upon him, mouth gaping.

Mikael was behind it and rammed his blade through its chest. Congealed blood spat from the wound, black and thick like syrup. Reiner came at it from the front, roaring as he lopped off its head.

The thing slumped into a tangled heap. Mikael yanked out his sword and cleaned the blade on his cloak. The last of the zombies was laid, brutally, to rest.

'Sigson,' Reiner said urgently, helping the priest to his feet. 'The binding. Can you do it?'

Leaning heavily on his captain, Sigson rose grimly with gritted teeth, and nodded.

'Gather them,' he ordered to his comrades.

Mikael, Halbranc, Kalten and Reiner dragged the corpses into a heap before the priest. Vaust watched, bleary-eyed, his brother laid beside him.

Sigson invoked the binding rites of Morr, that which ensured the guardianship of the body and the soul once the two were separated. It was a labour and the veteran priest fought for breath to intone the complicated ritual. The knights knelt beside him, muttering their own prayers to the enigmatic god of Death.

Sweat upon his brow, Sigson let out a long and ragged breath.

'It is done.'

Reiner nodded and looked at Mikael.

'Open up the gate,' he ordered.

'Yes, captain.'

Mikael walked over to the chapel gate and hefted the thick wooden bar fixed across, trapping the creatures while they destroyed them.

Light washed into the greyish confines, as if reluctant to enter. A group of worried-looking villagers approached the threshold.

'Is it over? Are we safe?' an elderly man stammered. Several figures cowered behind him. They seemed afraid, perhaps at the abominations within or perhaps at the templar of Morr stood before them, his armour wrought with skulls and effigies of death.

'It is done,' Mikael told him and turned to Sigson.

The priest, ashen faced, awash with sweat, collapsed. Vaust and Valen were near unconsciousness and the rest of the band was battered and bruised from the battle.

'Bury them face down and sanctify the ground upon the zenith of each Mannslieb,' Reiner told them as he stalked forward. 'Tell me, Alderman,' he added, a full head and shoulders above the man as he regarded him, 'is there a healer in the village?'

'No, I'm sorry,' the Alderman said fearfully. 'The nearest is the Temple of Shallya at Hochsleben, to the west.'

Reiner turned to Mikael, his pale blue eyes like pools of ice.

'Gather the horses,' he ordered. 'We ride to Hochsleben.'



DAWN HAD TURNED to greying day by the time they reached the town of Hochsleben. Even as they rode wearily through the gates, Mikael sensed a dark mood, as if the place were laden with some unknown threat.

Treading past the town's threshold, the sentry guards retreated into their gatehouse, nodding a fearful greeting at the dour knights templar. Poor folk walked quickly in groups, hugging rags to their feeble bodies, glancing about at each step. The wealthy rode in closed coaches and with armed escorts, fixed upon their destinations, as if ignorance of their surroundings might protect them.

'There is fear here,' Halbranc remarked beneath his breath as they passed a drunken tramp in the street, a bottle of liquor tinkling in his hand with the last dregs.

Reiner kept his eyes forward, gently urging his steed on.

'It is death.'

Mikael glanced behind him. The tramp shambled off toward an open street. A laden wagon emerged suddenly from his blind side, headed straight for the tramp. The wagoneer drove his beasts heedlessly, intent to get on, to get back, to get away from whatever grim fate had befallen the town. Travelling fast, it would crush the poor wretch!

With a grunt, Mikael spurred his horse, breaking away from his comrades. He rode hard, straight into the path of the wagon, crying out a warning.

'Halt, halt in the name of Morr!'

At the death god's name, the wagoneer pulled at the reigns, slewing his cart to hasty stop, just avoiding the fearless templar.

Yelping in fright, the tramp shrank into a ball and cowered in the dirt, dropping his bottle to shatter upon the cobblestones.

Realising he wasn't going to die, the tramp sat up and held the broken end of the bottle disconsolately.

The wagoneer shrank before Mikael's stern gaze.

'I didn't see him,' he pleaded, dismounting to check his load.

Something had come loose from beneath the cloth covering the back of the wagon.

It was a human hand. The skin upon it had been removed.

'They're from the mortuary,' the man explained, as if sensing Mikael's question. 'They're to be taken from the town and burned.' He pushed the hand back into the wagon with a stick from his belt and tied the cloth down. 'Victims of the Reaper,' he added, whispering fearfully, and rode off hard down the street without looking back.

Mikael was about to call him back, when a firm hand gripped his shoulder.

'We have found the Temple of Shallya,' Reiner told him. 'Halbranc and Kalten have taken the others there. They will meet us in the house of Morr.'

Mikael nodded. As he rode away with his captain, he looked back over to where the tramp had been sitting, but he was gone.

Whatever ailed this town they must first pay their respects to Morr before any explanation could be sought. There was darkness here; Mikael felt it as a dull ache in his head, a sensation that grew stronger with each moment. He thought of telling Reiner. His captain was a puritan, cold like steel and as unyielding in matters of faith and heresy. Cold and compassionless, the templar captain might put him to the sword if he thought him bewitched. Mikael stayed quiet.



THE TEMPLE OF MORR was a huge, gothic structure, stark and imposing in the middle of the poorest quarter in Hochsleben. A mist was forming, the day as bleak as the town's mood. A fine drizzle, exuding from a steel-grey sky, exacerbated the palpable misery felt by the human dregs that cowered in the streets or burrowed into their hovels.

Mikael averted his gaze from them, trying to focus on the monolithic temple. He felt for their suffering, their pain, and pitied them. Perhaps that's why he had gone to the tramp's rescue.

A great wedge of stone steps lay before them, spreading out from the black, oak gates of the temple like the over-extended jaw of some huge skeletal head. Two priests, lowly acolytes, scrubbed feverishly at the steps with buckets of water, their arms and knees sodden, red-faced with effort.

'Morr's blessing,' Reiner said to the priests, dismounting from his steed, a stable lad rushing over to take the reins from him. Another boy came over to Mikael's horse as he dismounted.

'We seek the head of the Temple,' Reiner told them, striding up the steps.

'Morr's blessing,' one of the priests breathed. 'Brother Dolmoth is within the sanctum.'

Reiner nodded his thanks, Mikael close behind him, muttering Morr's blessings with the other priest as he followed, looking down at their endeavours. Faint, but still visible, a stain marred the stone steps. It was dark and thick, like blood.



THANK MORR FOR your coming,' Dolmoth told them earnestly. The priest looked ravaged by premature age. There was a shadow beneath his eyes, a worn expression that Mikael believed had come only recently, as if whatever malady seized the town had him in its grip too.

'What is it that ails this place, priest?' Reiner's face was as hard and unmoving as stone.

Dolmoth sagged, as if he could no longer bear an invisible weight upon his shoulders. He sat down upon a wooden stool, bidding the knights to follow.

Harsh grey light seeped through a nearby window, shadows dragging down the priest's features as if they were made of softening clay.

'Last night and on the same night for the past six weeks, a body has been left upon the steps of our temple.'

'It was blood that the acolytes were washing off the steps,' Mikael said.

Reiner looked at him, slightly surprised. He had not noticed it. As they both regarded him, Mikael felt compelled to continue.

'The Reaper,' he said. Dolmoth's expression darkened further, hand trembling as he drank from a silver goblet; a decanter set upon the table filled with communal wine.

'The wagoneer in the street said he carried "victims of the Reaper",' Mikael explained. 'At first I thought he had meant death, but he was referring to a murderer.'

Dolmoth nodded, draining the goblet and reaching to pour another drink.

Reiner grasped his hand.

'You've had enough.'

Brother Dolmoth's eyes, sore and red, held some resistance. But, when he looked at the templar captain, he withdrew.

'Come with me,' he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

Dolmoth led them through the sanctum and across the grounds to a small annex, located in the south wing of the mighty building next to a temple garden. The templars followed him without word or query. A feeling of dread and warning grew in Mikael's gut.

'The body left upon the steps last night,' Dolmoth said. 'Our mortician is examining it. I think you should see it.'

Dolmoth opened a small door to the annex. A corridor stretched before them. Immediately they were struck by the stink of chemicals and unguents.

'Merrick's embalming fluids,' Dolmoth explained and grasping a lantern, hooked at the entrance to the corridor, led them forward.

The corridor was long and dark. Fluttering torches, pitched sporadically in iron sconces, threw little more than a lambent glow onto stark, stone walls that were slick with moisture, black smears visible in the wan light of Dolmoth's swaying lantern.

'Are we heading down?' Mikael asked. He felt the air growing colder and the undeniable sensation of descent.

'The mortuary is located in our temple catacombs. It's an area largely unused by the priests and allows Merrick to work in peace.' Dolmoth had to raise his voice. The corridor was low, the tall, armoured templars forced to hunch beneath the ceiling and Dolmoth ranged ahead of them.

They reached the mortuary. Dolmoth heaved a stout, wooden door open that protested on creaking hinges.

As they entered, the templars stooping further to get through the narrow arch, a man glanced up from a body set upon a metal table. He was thin and wiry, with a silver spike of beard jutting from his jaw and a pepper wash of stubble across the neck and chin. Dressed in a bloody tabard, thick glasses covering his eyes and flecked with blood spatter, this had to be the mortician Dolmoth had spoken of.

'Greetings,' he said, masking his surprise.

'This is Merrick,' Dolmoth told the templars, stood like giants in the tiny chamber. It was filled with all-manner of crude equipment; saws, blades, scalpels, stitch and thread, with wooden racks filled with phials and beakers, a brown, oily liquid within each. Although small, there was a shabby-looking cloth draped over an open archway at the back of the room, which doubtless led to Merrick's private chambers. A bucket rested at the foot of the table. Mikael noticed blood seeping down into it from a funnel attached to the slab above.

'There is little left,' Merrick told him, as if reading his mind.

It wrong-footed the templar and he flashed a glance at Reiner, who stood impassively as he regarded the mortician.

'We wish to see the victim,' he said.

Merrick nodded and gestured to the table. He seemed to wither before Reiner's steely gaze, like most who met the formidable knight.

Dolmoth hung back and covered his mouth. He had seen the victim before, Mikael realised he had been the one who found them.

Merrick flicked a nervous glance at the towering knights, before he concentrated on the corpse.

'As you can see,' he began, 'skin has been removed from the chest, legs, hands and feet and there are marks upon the wrists and ankles.' Merrick turned the left wrist of the victim over. There was a dark, reddish bruise, harsh and violent.

'I have heard of evil men who eat the flesh of the living,' Reiner said, betraying no emotion as he regarded the brutalised body. 'In backward cultures. They are used in rituals to summon daemons and the dead from the grave.'

'And these marks,' Mikael asked, about to touch the bruised skin, before having second thoughts and snapping his hand away. 'The victim was bound.'

'I found them all like that,' Dolmoth muttered from behind his hand. 'Trussed up like meat, backs arched, pain etched upon their faces.'

Reiner stared at the priest cowering in the shadows. Mikael detected the faintest sneer. His captain deplored weakness, almost as much as he deplored the evil creatures that it was his lot to destroy.

'And the lack of blood,' Merrick said, stooping down, a pendant, on a chain around his neck, slipping free of the tabard. 'The victims were all partially exsanguinated.'

'Bled by a daemon,' Reiner muttered darkly, concentrating back on the corpse.

'That pendant,' Mikael said, 'was it given to you by a loved one?' There was a longing in the young templar's voice as a memory sparked of his life before the temple.

Merrick's face darkened, his expression edged with regret.

'It was my wife's,' he said, looking at Mikael. 'She gave it to me before she died. Plague took her long ago. For a time I had my son, but a riot in the town, three months ago, claimed his life. He was crushed to death by Imperial cavalry sent to quell the disorder. He had nothing to do with the rioting. He became embroiled...' Merrick stopped himself, before his emotions bettered him. Sternness crept across his face and he tucked the pendant away, closing his eyes briefly as he muttered a prayer.

'I'm sorry,' Mikael said and felt his own regret.

'This terror has gone on long enough,' Reiner said, addressing the haggard Dolmoth.

'We will find this Reaper,' he promised, 'And bring Morr's justice down upon his head.' Reiner stalked from the mortuary, full of purpose, passing Dolmoth, who thanked Morr profusely for their deliverance.

Mikael nodded a farewell to Merrick, and gave Morr's blessing to Dolmoth, before hurrying after Reiner.



N THE SANCTUM, Halbranc and Kalten awaited them.

'What news from the Temple of Shallya?' Reiner asked.

INFERNO!

'They sleep,' Kalten told him. 'Sigson is badly injured, some of his wounds are infected. Vaust too.'

'And Valen?' said Mikael.

Kalten's face was grim.

'It is feared he will not last the night.'

An uncomfortable silence descended. Reiner quashed it.

'Then it will be Morr's will. We do not mourn our dead, we deliver them to His arms. It is no different for Valen.'

'You are a cold man, Reiner,' Halbranc said. 'I have never known the like, even in an order such as ours.'

Reiner was impassive as he regarded the giant templar, taller even than him and wider still at the shoulders.

'There is little time for compassion, Halbranc. Morr's work is to be done.'

Reiner told them both of what he and Mikael had discovered about the Reaper.

'The Templars of Morr are justly feared,' Reiner said. 'We shall begin by questioning the population about these heinous acts. I doubt there will be any with the stomach to lie, not with Morr's judgement hanging over them.'



YOU CANNOT EXPECT me to work with such shoddy materials,' a sibilant voice said, echoing in the emptiness of the darkened room.

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought the girl, I made a mistake,' another voice pleaded.

'You do want my aid, don't you?'

'Yes, yes of course. I brought you back, didn't I?'

'That you did, and in doing so, your heart became as black as mine,' the voice said sneeringly.

'I am nothing like you.' The second voice tried to sound indignant but lacked conviction.

'Don't delude yourself, you just don't know it. Now, find me another specimen. It has to be perfect, do you understand? Perfect.'

'Yes, I understand. Perfect. I'm sorry. I'll do better next time.'



EVEN IN THE fading day, in a town awash with unease, the market continued to do business. In the Empire, it seemed, commerce stopped for nothing.

To better serve their aims, the templars' had split up. Reiner and Kalten took the slums, whilst Mikael and Halbranc surveyed the market.

Across the market square the two of them noticed a butcher selling his wares to a hungry, if skittish, crowd. The man was obese and slovenly, thick fingers holding bloodied joints aloft, his ragged tabard stained with blood and grease. He looked up from his banter, but when he saw the templars, hastily averted his gaze.

'This looks a good place to start,' Halbranc said, immediately suspicious as he stalked forward. 'The bodies trussed up like meat sacks, you said?'

'Yes, but wait Halbranc.'

'Why?'

'Look at him, obese, thick-fingered. His brow is fevered even now from what little exertion it takes to address a crowd. I scarcely believe he could carry a dead body a few feet, let alone up the steps of the Temple of Morr,' Mikael said. 'And the skin cut from the body, it was precise and careful. I doubt this man has the skill.'

'Very well,' said Halbranc. 'Then what do you suggest?'

Mikael thought for a moment. The market stalls were throbbing; people possessed with an urgency to get what they needed quickly, before the onset of night. As he looked around, the shadows seemed to coalesce in the distance.

'There,' he said, pointing towards a worn looking building.

As they approached, Mikael read a sign above the door.

Lothmar's Tannery.

The sign was faded with age, the windows stained by a yellowish grime and covered by thick leather drapes, but the door was open and the darkness within beckoned them.

The room was dark, with the faint stink of musk and spice. A patina of dust rested upon everything inside, tall racks of leather and cured animal hide. The place was crammed and over-burdened, making it feel claustrophobic. The dust-clogged air made Mikael choke.

'May I help you?' a rasping voice came from the back of the room. A man with his back to them stood behind a long, broad, wooden counter. Various cutting and hammering tools hung upon a rack in front of him. He replaced a long, wide knife and pulled something over his head as he turned to face them.

'You have heard of the murderer who blights this town?' Halbranc began, walking forward.

Little light penetrated the tannery. Shadows clawed out from alcoves and dark corners. Mikael felt like the gloom was sticking to him as he followed Halbranc.

Mikael had to mask his shock when he saw the man whom, he gathered was Lothmar.

Half of his face was covered by a leather mask. A blood-shot pupil stared out from an eye-hole, with pink scar-tissue just visible at the fringe of the mask. His hands were covered too, with thick, leather gloves. But despite his obvious afflictions, he was tall and strong. Years of stripping animal carcasses and tearing up toughened hide would do that to a man.

'Would you close that?' he asked, wincing against the feeble light pouring in from the outside.

Mikael nodded, a glance at Halbranc as he eyed the tanner dubiously, and went back to close the door.

Silence descended. A smile cracked the tanner's ravaged face as he saw the templars' discomfort.

'I was burned. Here, in the tannery,' he told them. 'There are vats in the back.' He thumbed behind him to a darkened arch which led further still into the tannery. 'They get hot, to cure the hides and toughen them, so they can be cut and fashioned.'

Halbranc raised an eyebrow.

'I am Lothmar,' he added, offering a hand. 'And yes, I have heard of the Reaper.'

'What have you heard?' Halbranc said, ignoring the hand as he met the man's gaze, despite his unsettling visage.

'That he hasn't been caught, that the town is in fear of him and my business is suffering as a result.' Lothmar was indignant and stood his ground.

'I see your cloak is damaged,' he said. 'I could fashion you a replacement. These are of the highest quality.' He indicated a wooden stand upon which hung an assortment of cloaks and capes. 'I can assure you, they are very supple, like a second skin.'

'I think not,' Halbranc growled.

'Well then, I don't think I can help you further,' Lothmar said.

Mikael rested a hand upon Halbranc's shoulder. His instincts told him the tanner knew nothing.

'We thank you for your time,' Mikael said with respect. This tanner had not balked in the face of interrogation. It seemed the folk of Hochsleben would be more difficult to intimidate than Reiner had predicted.

Even Halbranc relented and nodded. 'Morr's blessing.'

Lothmar nodded back respectfully.

Mikael and Halbranc left the shadows of the tannery, Lothmar watching them leave.

'You're quick to judge, Halbranc,' Mikael said as they made for the market square.

'Men in masks usually have something to hide,' he grumbled.

'He wears his scars on the outside,' Mikael said, 'I trust that over those that harbour theirs' within.'



REINER AND KALTEN were in the market square. They had learnt nothing from patrolling the slums. Reiner's tactics had only served to make the population less cooperative, either that or a greater fear held their tongues.

'Night approaches,' said Reiner. The sky dimmed like the light around a fading flame and thick clouds billowed overhead, smothering the stars. 'We can learn little more today.'

The other templars were in agreement. They found lodgings at an inn, The Stableman, in short order and retired quickly to bed, battle-weary bones finally demanding rest. Having bid his comrades a good night, only Mikael remained, waiting

with the rest of the patrons who were reluctant to leave. He recognised one of them, it was the poor wretch he had saved from the wagon earlier in the day. He was looking forlornly into an empty cup, unaware of the templar's eyes upon him. Mikael turned away and stared into the flickering flames of the dying fire.

He was deeply troubled, a gnawing dread grew within him that he did not understand. With the onset of night, images of his past came back, forming in the hearth like fiery spectres.

The forest rose about him, a cloak of arboreal gloom.

He held a dagger in his hand, stained with his brother's blood.

A deer mewled in the distance, its final dying sounds. Its breath was a cloud of white mist in the cold wintry air. It came in bursts; faster and faster as the deer's heart beat its last.

Mikael looked into its eyes and found his own fear mirrored there. The mewling stopped, the deer was dead.

Mikael cried out, tears flooding from his eyes, cold like daggers of ice as they ran down his cheeks. He looked into the forest void for Stephan, but his brother was gone.

A shallow hiss wrenched Mikael into the present. The innkeeper had doused the burning embers in the hearth.

'Wouldn't want to start a fire, eh?' he said. He was a broad man, thick-jawed with an eye-patch and a scar that ran beneath, all the way down to his neck.

Mikael had stripped out of most of his armour, leaving only a breastplate. He looked like any common sell-sword without his trappings and insignia.

'Chasing monsters, boy?' the innkeeper said with a wry smile.

Shocked at the man's boldness, Mikael was about to protest when the inn-keeper stopped him.

'It's written all over your face. I was a captain in the Averheim army. I've my share of them,' he said and leaned in closer.

His voice was little more than a whisper.

'Don't let them consume you, boy. Whatever ill blights your past, there's little you can do about it now.'

'I am a templar of Morr,' was all Mikael could think of to say, hoping to discourage the innkeeper.

'Then you walk with death, but does he walk with you?'

'...' Mikael began then rose from his seat, pushing past the innkeeper, and fled out into the night.

As he stood in the darkness, his heart pounded and cooling sweat chilled him. He sucked up a great gulp of air, waiting for his racing heart to subside.

'Can't beat the night air, eh?' Halbranc leant against the wooden beam of the inn's veranda. He held a dark bottle in his hand and drank deeply, then offered it across.

Mikael shook his head.

'Couldn't sleep?' the giant templar asked. Even without his amour, he was huge and imposing. Utterly bald, it was as if he was made from chiselled stone.

Mikael sighed, searching the darkness for an answer that wasn't there.

'Ever since we came to this place, I have had a dark and forbidding feeling, as if—'

Screams suddenly tore into the night.

Mikael and Halbranc drew their swords. His confession would have to wait.

The sound came from further up the street, towards the market. They raced towards it, the bottle shattering as Halbranc cast it aside.

'For the love of Sigmar,' a figure wailed, a distant silhouette gradually coming into focus. 'I've seen it, I've seen it.' It was a woman. Wearing a gaudy dress, thick make-up smeared over her face to hide her age, she was one of Hochsleben's veteran streetwalkers.

At first she ran into Halbranc's arms, but recoiled when she saw the symbols of Morr etched upon his armour.

'What have you seen, woman?' Halbranc demanded, holding her wrist before she fled.

'The Reaper,' she gasped, struggling against Halbranc's iron grip. 'Over there.' Her eyes widened in terror as she tried to pull away.

A short distance away, in the market square, a figure hunched over a heavy burden and dragged it through the street. Shrouded by the darkness, it was impossible to discern the figure's identity.

Halbranc let the streetwalker go and she raced away into the dark.

'Halt,' he bellowed suddenly. 'Halt in the name of Morr.'

Halbranc and Mikael started running forward. The figure looked up at them from whatever it was doing, and ran. The templars sheathed their swords and gave chase.

The figure had left a body in the street. It was a man. A dagger wound through the heart had killed him, but he was otherwise unmolested, although both his hands and feet were bound.

Mikael and Halbranc ran on.

He was fast, a long cloak flapped in his wake as the figure fled from the knights. But Mikael was gaining on him. He darted down an alley and the templar followed, abruptly swallowed by the darkness within.

'Mikael, wait,' Halbranc cried from the mouth of the alleyway.

Mikael glanced back. Halbranc leant against the wall, breathing hard and sweating.

'This is one monster I will not let slip,' Mikael muttered to himself and left Halbranc behind him, driving after the Reaper to become lost in the gloomy alleyway.

Upon racing around a corner, the man vanished. Mikael stopped and drew his sword, listening. The rising breeze whispered in his ear, sibilant and eerie, a bawdy drunk sang raucously, his voice faint, streets away in the distance.

He edged forward, willing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Formless dark became silhouette before him. He was gripped by a sudden sense of danger behind him. Pain like white heat flared in Mikael's back as he tried to turn. He'd been stabbed. His leggings felt warm and wet, as blood ran down his leg. He glimpsed a flash in the corner of his eye and felt a heavy object smash against his head. Reeling from the attack, Mikael was vaguely aware of glass fragments in his hair.

Vision fogging, he fell. Reaching out into the growing blackness, he clawed at his attacker, pulling something free. He struck the ground hard and a lance of fire pierced his shoulder. He fought it for a moment, then blacked out.



ADIOT!' THE VOICE was hard and angry in the darkened room.

'I'm sorry. Please our pact,' the second voice pleaded.

'Ezequaer is no pawn, dictated to by the likes of you. Corpsemaster they called me. Fellshadow I was known as. I will honour the pact at my choosing. Only I have the skill to grant your desire.'

'Yes, yes, of course. Please, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' said the second voice, grovelling profusely. 'I had the perfect specimen, but for those templars,' he whined.

The first voice paused, his interest piqued. The atmosphere in the darkness changed. 'Templars you say?' the voice said, anger receding.

'Yes,' answered the second voice, breathless and confused.

'How interesting. Tell me more of these templars...'



AHOT SPIKE OF pain shot through him as Mikael came too. He thought he could smell pine and the faint musky odour of the forest, but realised he was in the alleyway. Rain was falling. Through the watery haze, three figures stood over him, the black hair of two of them tinged with droplets.

'Mikael,' a voice urged. 'Mikael, are you wounded?' Halbranc stooped down and held his head in a massive hand.

'I think I was stabbed,' he groaned, spitting rain water from his mouth.

Halbranc eased him over and Kalten, who crouched nearby, nodded.

'We must get him to the Temple of Shallya,' Kalten said, rain weighing down his long hair and flecking his beard. 'A piece of the blade is lodged in his armour. And what is that stench?' he said, sniffing Mikael's clothes.

'It's all over him,' Halbranc said. 'I know not.'

'What is this?' Reiner's voice cut through like a cold blade, as he stooped to retrieve something Mikael clutched in his hand.

Halbranc's voice grew dark.

'I have seen that before.'

Reiner held it up. Mikael's head throbbed painfully inside his skull, like a perpetual cannonade, but he focused long enough to recognise what his captain held aloft.

A half-mask with one eye hole cut into it.

'It's the tanner, we spoke to him this afternoon. His lodgings are upon the market square,' Halbranc explained, anger in his voice. He told them quickly of his and Mikael's encounter, of the darkened store, the tanner's shunning of the light and his reference to a cloak that felt like a 'second skin'.

'This wretch is most likely trading with human flesh,' Reiner spat. 'Victims drained of blood, aversion to the light: I can think of no other creature with such despicable traits.'

'A vampire,' said Kalten, crouching at Mikael's side.

Reiner crushed the mask in his hand.

'We head for the tannery. Kalten, you will come with me. Halbranc, take Mikael to the Temple of Shallya and meet us when you can.'

'It lies to the west quarter,' Helbranc told him.

'I remember it,' Reiner said. 'This ends tonight.'



AS HALBRANC HEAVED Mikael onto his back with a grunt, and Reiner and Kalten stalked off to confront the Reaper, no one noticed a small figure watching from the shadows. His teeth gleamed white in the darkness as a grin split his features, and he scurried off to report to his master.

He was lost, alone in the darkness. Cold stone pricked his fingers. The air was damp and stale.

Mikael wandered as if blind.

A door opened ahead of him. He drew his sword and felt compelled toward it.

A rising dread filled his stomach. Something was wrong.

He ran, ran with fear at his heels.

Bursting into the light, he entered another room. There were seven bodies chained to the walls, hung up, feet dangling limply above the ground.

A spasm of fear hit Mikael like a physical blow and he recoiled. They wore the armour of Templars of Morr, except that each had his face covered by black shrouds.

Heart thumping Mikael reached out, suddenly within touching distance of one of the bodies and pulled the shroud away.

A pale death mask regarded him beneath. It was Kalten. The templar opened his eyes.

'Mikael,' he moaned with a voice from beyond the grave...

Mikael screamed. Pain burned in him anew and he realised he was awake.

A strong hand held him still as he shook with the night terror, a fevered sweat drenching his clothes.

'Rest easy,' Sigson's voice was calm and soothing as he crouched beside him, 'You are safe.'

'Sigson,' Mikael rasped, breathing hard, 'I had a dream.'

Sigson was abruptly concerned. As the god of dreams, as well as the guardian of the dead, Morr bestowing a vision upon one of his templars was oft portentous and should not be ignored.

'What did you see, Mikael?'

'Where are the others?'

'Valen and Vaust are still recuperating, the fever has passed but they are still bedridden,' Sigson explained, nonplussed.

Mikael grabbed Sigson by his jerkin. His hands trembled, his voice infected with urgency. 'No Kalten, Reiner, Halbranc – where are they?'

'Halbranc headed into town a few moments ago, he was leaving by the time I entered your chambers.'

Mikael released the warrior priest and got up from his bed, biting back the pain as he strapped on his armour waiting nearby.

Sigson rose and held Mikael's shoulder.

'What did you see, Mikael?' he urged, gripping tightly so Mikael would listen.

The young templar looked directly into the warrior priest's eyes and spoke as intently as he could.

'I saw death, Sigson. The death of our entire company.'

Sigson's face grew dark as the resonance of what Mikael said struck him. 'I'm coming with you.'

Mikael and Sigson ran through cobble streets, rain battering against their armour with such fury it was as if nature itself had

come to oppose them. They drove on through the downpour, with not a soul in sight until they reached the market square.

Two figures, one huge, the other small and slight by comparison, conversed beyond a wall of driving rain. As they got closer, Mikael recognised the immense form of Halbranc and the wiry mortician, Merrick, in front of him.

Halbranc turned to them both when he saw them.

'What are you doing out here?' he bellowed against the raucous downpour. Overhead, thunder boiled and lightning cracked the sky.

'The others,' Mikael cried back. 'Where are they? They were forced close, so they could hear each other.'

'At the tanners. Lothmar attacked you in the street, you tore off his mask,' Halbranc said, spitting away the water washing over his mouth as he spoke. 'I was headed to them, when I was stopped.' He looked over at Merrick.

The mortician looked half-drowned. His face blue and pale with cold, he clutched a thick but sodden cloak around his body, and shivered. 'Another victim has been found,' he explained, leaning in to speak, voice shaking. 'He is alive and has been taken to the mortuary. The watchmen thought he was dead,' he cried.

'They found him in the street?' Mikael asked, confused.

Merrick nodded, water trickling rapidly down his face.

Raging wind filled the silence. They all breathed hard in the dire conditions. Mikael regarded Merrick closely, before he turned to Halbranc.

'Go with him,' Mikael said. 'We'll meet you there, once we've found the others.'

Halbranc nodded, grateful to be on his way and getting out of the terrible weather.

The party broke up, Halbranc and Merrick heading toward the house of Morr, Mikael and Sigson to the tanners. None were aware of a fifth person on the streets, braving the rain. He watched the entire scene and sticking to the shadows, followed the two templars.



THE DOOR TO Lothmar's tannery swung open on creaking hinges. Buffeted by the wind and rain, it slammed hard against the frame before being sucked open again.

Mikael forged inside, ahead of Sigson, sword drawn.

Darkness surrounded him but Mikael could tell the shop was empty. He remembered the archway towards the rear.

'There is another chamber beyond that arch,' he whispered to Sigson, who crept behind him.

'I see it.'

The two men moved carefully in the gloom toward the archway. As they reached it, a cold draft wafted up at them, stone steps descending into a cellar below.

The swinging door slammed hard against the frame behind them, rupturing the silence. They turned as one, weapons raised, but there was no one there.

Mikael blew out his nerves, and, with a glance at Sigson, headed down the steps. A crack in the roof above threw a shaft of moonlight within.

A body slumped in the stairwell was illuminated, a sword in its hand.

It was Reiner.

Mikael felt dizzy and for a moment thought he would fall, but gathered himself and raced to the bottom.

He lifted his captain's chin. Reiner's eyes opened a crack. There was an ugly bruise upon his forehead and a bloody gash where he'd been struck.

'He was already dead,' he mumbled, semi-conscious.

A door was ahead. It was open, and dark within.

'Where is Kalten?' Mikael asked, his sense of dread growing.

'I don't know, we were ambushed.'

Mikael looked back, Sigson was behind him.



THE TWO OF them entered the room. A lantern was hooked up just inside.

Oil hissed as Mikael ignited it and yellow light washed over the room.

INFERNO!

Just beyond the lambent glow of the lantern, Lothmar lay dead, his throat slit, mask ripped callously from his face, exposing his scars. Mikael crouched over his body. The wan light revealed the pallor of Lothmar's skin, white like alabaster. His right eye, unblemished from the accident was pink.

'He was no vampire,' Mikael said, voice tinged with regret.

'An albino,' Sigson said, crouched next to him. 'But if not this poor soul, then why cut them?'

'A ritual perhaps, or maybe the murders were meant to look like Lothmar's work, or that of a butcher, with wrists and ankles tied.'

'There might be a way to know for certain,' Sigson said. 'Move aside.' Sigson leant over Lothmar's body and muttered a prayer beneath his breath. The air tingled as he invoked the power of his god. The hairs rose on the back of Mikael's neck. Morr had answered.

'Push down upon his chest,' Sigson ordered, intent on the tanner and leaned down, putting his ear to Lothmar's mouth. 'Morr will do the rest.'

'Who attacked you?' he whispered, and nodded to Mikael, who pushed down as instructed.

The last breath in Lothmar's lungs eked out.

'A man... a stranger,' he wheezed, the words drawn out and laboured. 'He wore... a mask. Terrible... odour...' Then there was silence, the air within him finally expired.

'There is no more,' Sigson said, getting to his feet. Mikael did the same and turned to the door. A figure stood there.

They drew their swords.

'Identify yourself!' Mikael demanded.

'Do not be alarmed,' a deep and confident voice told them. A figure stepped into the lantern light.

It was a man, perhaps close to his forties with greying hair and a thinning beard, but strong and powerfully built beneath simple brown robes. A breastplate covered his chest, etched into it the symbol of a fiery comet. Hanging down from his neck was a silver talisman that bore the sigil of a hammer.

'I am Rathorne,' he said. 'Warrior priest of Sigmar.' A short figure shuffled out of the darkness to hunch beside him, a pitiable

wretch dressed in nought but rags. Mikael recognised, once again, the tramp he had rescued.

'You,' he said, accusingly.

'What business have you here?' Sigson asked, sword raised.

'Please,' Rathorne said. 'Put down your weapons. We are here for the same purpose.'

'What might that be?' Mikael asked, unwilling to relent.

'To catch the Reaper and end his murderous rampage.'

They lowered their swords.

'Your expressions demand explanations,' Rathorne began. 'But since your comrade is wounded and our prey loose, I'll keep them short. I have been tracking this devil since I heard of the dire happenings in this town more than four weeks ago. His movements have been a mystery to me but I did not want to reveal myself lest I alert him. When your company arrived I thought you might provoke a mistake, so I had Vislen follow you.' The impish tramp bowed and grinned, revealing a set of perfect, white teeth.

'It seems we are allies then,' Mikael said, noting the distaste in Rathorne's eyes, and sheathed his sword. Sigson did the same.

'But we have reached a dead end,' Mikael explained. 'Although one of our comrades is questioning a survivor of the attacks as we speak. Aside from that, all we know is he drains his victim's blood and bears an unpleasant odour.'

'Much like the stench that clings to you,' Rathorne said, breathing in the stink of Mikael's clothes. 'It is consistent with vampirism.' He glanced down at Vislen, who shuffled over to the templar and began sniffing at him.

'What is he doing?' Mikael asked, raising his arms and looking down suspiciously at the runtish tramp.

Vislen shuffled back to his master, and, as Rathorne leaned down, whispered into his ear.

'Embalming fluid,' Rathorne announced, 'and something else.'

The warrior priest moved over to Mikael and examined the wound in his back, now a dark red mark in his jerkin, just below the back-plate.

Rathorne dug into the wound with his fingers and as Mikael was about to recoil said,

'Hold, there is something left in the wound.'

The young templar winced in pain, neck arched around so he could see what the Sigmarite was doing. Rathorne pulled a tiny sliver of metal out of the wound, letting it fall into his open palm.

He looked up at the two templars.

'A scalpel blade.'

'Merrick,' Mikael spat with anger. Realisation dawned soon after. 'Halbranc,' he gasped and raced to the door. 'Sigson,' he said, turning, 'stay with Reiner. I must get to the mortuary.'

He felt a hand on his arm. Looking back he was met by Rathorne's intense gaze. 'You mean we.'

Mikael was defiant at the priest's interference but had no time to argue.

'Then, come on,' he said, and he and Rathorne sped out of the tannery into the night.



BOLTING THROUGH THE temple of Morr, acolytes and priests scattering in their wake, Mikael and Rathorne were quickly at the door to the mortuary.

A muffled voice emanated from beyond. It was Merrick, he was talking to someone.

'...but what of our pact, your promise to me,' Merrick urged desperately. 'I have fulfilled my part of the bargain. I have your amulet, you are bound to it and my bidding. I didn't mean to tarnish this one, but he struggled so, and I have brought you a new body to replace it.'

A muted cry, as if through a gag, echoed in the chamber, faint but discernable. Mikael recognised Halbranc's voice and heaved at the door.

It was locked tight.

'Stand aside,' Rathorne ordered, taking an icon of Sigmar from his robes as he pushed in front of the templar.

'By the order of Sigmar,' he bellowed with conviction, loosing a warhammer from a leather loop at his waist, swivelling it in his hand as he tested the grip. 'Get back,' he said to Mikael.

'Open this door!' Rathorne struck, and the door was smashed open, splinters flying as it slammed into the adjacent wall with a heavy 'thunk'. The warrior priest waded in immediately, Mikael was right behind him.

He gasped when he saw Kalten's body on the mortuary table, as the dream came back. His throat was slit but had been done so with a struggle; numerous deep cuts lacerating his neck, face and chest, his features now horribly mutilated. In the far corner, Halbranc struggled. His head was bruised and he was gagged, hands and feet both bound with thick rope. And before them stood Merrick, the pitiable mortician who had lost his family, the pendant his wife had given him hanging around his neck. The man Mikael had felt the deepest sympathy for. But now there was a darkness about his eyes and face, the shadow of a driven man, one who was willing to do absolutely anything to achieve his goal.

'Where did you get that amulet?' Mikael demanded, a raised hand compelling Rathorne to wait.

Merrick looked down at it, toying with it in his fingers, as it glowed with an evil light. 'A forgotten chamber in the catacombs,' Merrick confessed, with a glance at the veiled off room at the back of the mortuary. He struggled within himself now, at the final moment, he realised the consequences of his deeds, the innocents he had killed. 'I stole it, watched the priests for months. I knew I could bind him to it, that he would do my will.'

'Merrick, you fool,' Mikael spat, wrenching the mortician back into the present.

'I... It's for my son,' he said, weeping, the old Merrick returned for but a moment. 'I didn't want to kill them,' he said forlornly, eyes pleading forgiveness. 'But I couldn't use the mortuary, they would find out, I would lose him.'

'Speak no further,' an evil voice echoed in the chamber. Not Merrick, someone else, beyond the curtain at the back of the room and with it came an ancient menace, one that spoke across the ages. 'Perform the binding rites.'

'What have you done?' Mikael said, edging forward.

'You'll not stop me!' Merrick cried.

Rathorne surged toward him, icon outstretched.

The evil voice spoke again and chanting filled the room. A dark nimbus of power played about the pendant around Merrick's neck as he mimicked it.

At last, Mikael realised it was no gift from his dead wife.

'Rathorne, wait!' he cried.

But the warrior priest was upon him, 'Down hell-kite!' he bellowed, thrusting the icon toward him.

A man possessed, Merrick launched himself at Rathorne, grabbing the priest's wrists as he completed the ritual.

'Night stalker,' Rathorne raged through clenched teeth as he struggled, 'feel the burning truth of Sigmar's wrath,' he spat, pushing the icon against Merrick's cheek, but nothing happened.

Upon the slab, Mikael watched in horror as the dead eyes of Kalten flicked open.

'Fool,' he said, in a reedy, rasping voice that was not his own. 'He is no vampire, he is my pawn,' he added, rising up from the slab and grasping his fallen sword.

Rathorne wrenched himself free from Merrick's grasp and faced off against Kalten's re-animated corpse.

'But my son, you promised to bring him back. What of our pact?' Merrick wailed, rushing toward the undead monster, sobbing.

The thing that used to be Kalten turned to him. 'The body is mine. It was always mine.' He smashed Merrick aside with a swipe of a mighty arm. The mortician clattered into the wooden racking, shattering the vials and bottles, chemicals spreading across the floor. Amidst the foul unguents and oils he lay still.

'By Sigmar's hand...' Rathorne cried, charging forward.

'Silence!' Kalten bellowed, blasting the warrior priest back into the wall with black fire from his eyes. Rathorne slumped unconscious, faint smoke rising from his hair and robes.

As Kalten turned, Mikael raked his blade across the undead templar's eyes.

Kalten reeled from the blow, blinded, but recovered quickly, blocking a swipe aimed at his neck.

'Clever,' he rasped, lashing out with his blade.

Mikael parried, and edged around to the creature's left.

'But I don't need these eyes to see,' the monster told him, matching his movements.

'Release him,' Mikael spat as he drove a powerful thrust into Kalten's chest, right through his heart. He pushed hard into the wound, using the blade like a spear and smashed Kalten into the wall. Kalten's flailing sword clattered against a lantern, knocking it and the blade to the ground. Oil and flame ran inexorably to the spilled chemicals pooling near Merrick, who had shaken himself to.

'I won't die so easily,' it said mockingly, locking its hands around Mikael's throat.

Fire flared at the back of the chamber, Merrick dragging himself clear just in time.

'Rathorne,' Mikael urged through strangled gasps.

The warrior priest stirred and looked up through blood-shot eyes.

'Get Halbranc out, warn the priests.'

Dazedly, Rathorne obeyed and dragged a semi-conscious Halbranc to his feet as Mikael and Kalten struggled.

The young templar released his sword and smashed his fists down hard against Kalten's wrists. Rigor setting in, the fingers slipped away, losing their grip.

In the corner of his eye, Mikael saw Rathorne and Halbranc escape down the corridor as he backed away.

Kalten ambled toward him, Mikael's blade still stuck in his chest.

Smoke billowed as fire swathed the room, angry and intense as it roared amongst the stored chemicals. Bottles shattered with the heat.

A shadow leapt through the smoke and flame from the back of the chamber. It was Merrick. He dove upon Kalten's back and dragged him down. His clothes were on fire and they spread to the undead creature.

'You promised me, you bastard!' he cried, pulling the monster into the fire, using its body to shield him.

The flames ravaged Kalten's skin, cracking his armour, burning hair and cloth alike.

'No! the undead thing cried. 'I was to be reborn!'

Mikael tried to go to Merrick's aid, but couldn't reach him through the wall of fire and smoke.

'Merrick!' he cried, against the roaring inferno, hand before his face to ward off the heat.

Clutched in a fiery embrace, a dark miasma exuded from Kalten's mouth and seeped into Merrick as he wailed in anger and anguish. Kalten's corpse fell to the ground and burned. Merrick backed away, ripping off his burning shirt and clutched his face, screaming, the fire burning it red raw.

'Merrick!' Mikael cried again, coughing as smoke filled his lungs.

Strong hands grasped Mikael's shoulders and dragged him away from the conflagration. Rathorne had come back for him and heaved him out of the room just before the roof collapsed, and Merrick was lost to his sight.

Reaching the outside, flames danced before Mikael's eyes. His lungs were choking with smoke and his skin burned. As he collapsed, the last thing he saw was Merrick screaming, surrounded by fire, the image forever seared onto his memory.



MIKael AWOKE IN the Temple of Shallya. It was night and the rain had abated to a fine drizzle. He sat up in bed and allowed the moon, coming through a high window, to bathe him in its beam.

'Show yourself,' he said, looking out into the gloom.

A shadow moved at the far end of the room and stepped into the moonlight.

'I see the encounter has not dulled your instincts.' It was Sigson. 'I was trying not to wake you.'

'Where are the others?'

'Resting, as you should be.'

'There should be no rest for me,' Mikael said, broodingly. 'I left that poor man to die.'

'You make it sound like he was innocent,' Sigson said. 'Resurrecting the dead and killing those people, he was no better than the necromancer he foolishly consorted with.'

'You sound like Reiner.'

'I sound like a templar of Morr,' Sigson corrected him, agitation in his voice.

'Grief had driven him mad, Sigson. Mad to the point where he was capable of bloody and brutal murder.'

'Then his love for his son was his undoing. The dead should not be interfered with. That way lies heresy and damnation.'

Mikael fell silent. He knew Sigson was right and yet he thought he might have saved him, redeemed his soul somehow.

'The dream I had,' Mikael began. 'I saw Kalten's face. He was dead.'

'There was nothing you could have done to prevent that, Mikael. Halbranc and Reiner are both alive, mainly thanks to you. You cannot save everyone.'

'At least we can leave this place, now that it's over,' he muttered. 'Perhaps Merrick will find some peace at last, as well.'

Sigson's expression changed.

'You don't know?' he said.

'Know what?'

'When the fires were doused, I scoured the ruins of the mortuary. Kalten's body was burned, almost to ash, within his armour. But there was no sign of Merrick.'

'He survived? How?'

'I don't know, but I doubt he is in Hochsleben now and pursuit would be pointless, we have no idea of his direction.'

'When I saw him at the last Sigson, he was burned and I saw something enter his body, like a black mist. At the time I thought it a trick of the smoke and flames, but now...'

'So then,' Sigson said severely, 'it seems that Merrick was not the only one to escape the fire.'

'Then he is a renegade, and a dangerous one at that. It is our duty to hunt him down.'

'Yes, and we will,' he said rising, and walked over to the door to Mikael's chamber. When he turned, his face was grim. 'Rest, Mikael. Morning is not far off, and you'll need your strength for what is to come, I fear.'

The door shut, and, as a cloud smothered the moon, Mikael was left alone in the darkness. ☀



ENGAGE THE ENEMY

THOKAR, WOLF PRIEST of Fenris, transmitted his acceptance of the wolf lord's command, although he didn't expect the wolf lord to give it more than a glance. The wolf lord demanded quick obedience and such formalities were not to his taste. Thokar surveyed the Space Marines around him. Grey power armour glinted under the bright lights of the battle barge. Contrasting their boltguns and grenades, pelts and skulls of Fenrisian Wolves hung from their chest plates, shoulder pads and anywhere else the Space Wolves could fit them. Beneath his helm, Thokar smiled.

'For Fenris! For Russ! For the Emperor!' shouted the Space Wolves, raising their fists. The wolf priest lowered his black gauntleted hand as the others moved to the Thunderhawk. For other Chapters, war cries might be ceremony, but those words echoed like thunder in the hearts of his Wolves.

Thokar watched each of his Marines, seeing not the armoured and invincible warriors of the Imperium, but the individual warriors that he had chosen. So many times he'd searched for the bravest warriors of Fenris. He remembered the reverence in the eyes of mortals as they looked upon the Space Wolves as armoured gods. Each of these Grey Hunters had once been a Fenrisian warrior, struggling to survive in a land of eternal danger. The skills, the loyalty and the heart of these few had proven them worthy of travel to the Fang, the fortress of the Space Wolves. Thokar had guided

each one through the terrifying initiation process, implanting them with the gene-seed of the Chapter. Many warriors had not survived, but others accepted the gene-seed transformation into the Emperor's finest. Inside each one of them, the predator – the wolf within – stirred, awaiting the fight.

Thokar strode aboard the Thunderhawk, anticipating the descent to the war torn world below. Even the wolf priest in his long centuries had never seen a war like this one. The battles of Armageddon under the command of the Great Wolf, Logan Grimnar, paled in comparison to the massive conflict caused by the Black Crusade. Abbadon the Despoiler, most terrible living lord of Chaos, had led his Traitor Legions out of the Eye of Terror in such numbers that they threatened to consume the Imperium. Not since the Horus Heresy had mankind seen such conflict.

The machine spirits within the Thunderhawk roared as the landing craft descended to the dark jungles. To the east, the wolf priest saw explosions as battle continued in a burning city. The jolts of the descent mimicked the excitement in his blood. He was ready for combat, and he could sense that his packs were ready as well. The Thunderhawk came down with a hard landing, bursts of promethium flame clearing the jungle around the vessel.

Thokar nodded to his Grey Hunters and loyal Wolf Guard. They knew their roles: one team of Grey Hunters would scout ahead. Wulfric, a member of the Wolf Guard and an old friend, loved the hunt. He led Pack Morkai, while Pack Ranulf kept close to Thokar. The wolf priest stepped onto the planet's surface. Behind him, the ramp to the Thunderhawk closed.

The Space Wolves moved with a singular purpose. Within instants, the first squad of Grey Hunters had vanished. Pack Morkai had to move quickly, minutes were precious. Although the wolf priest had every bit of faith in the crew of the Thunderhawk, he knew that this enemy might detect the landing of even a single Thunderhawk. Thokar only hoped that the Iron Warriors hadn't already entrenched and trapped the jungle floor. Long minutes passed as the Space Marines moved through the jungle. The wolf priest waited for the first call from Wulfric and his lead pack.

'My lord, we have discovered the aftermath of a battle. Someone has claimed a few of our kills,' said Wulfric, with a hint of a grin in his voice.

The wolf priest nodded to the Grey Hunters around him. 'The first of our enemies have fallen.'

'Hold your position.' The wolf priest gestured to Pack Ranulf. No words were spoken; none were needed. In the matter of Chaos, they could not take chances. Bolters at the ready, the wolf priest led Pack Ranulf cautiously through the jungle to Wulfric's position.

The wolf priest's senses sharpened, focusing on this new world. Of the hundreds of smells in the jungle air, Thokar picked out several that did not belong in this environment. The oily and metallic odours of machinery were mixed with familiar scents, reminding him somehow of his own Wolves.

When Thokar reached the site, the jungle had already reclaimed most of the battlefield. Creeper vines, blood ferns and assorted insectoids covered the metallic and gold plated armour of the Traitor Marines. The smell of death permeated everything. Wulfric glanced at Thokar, then stepped back to allow the wolf priest's

examination. The events of the battle unfolded in Thokar's mind as he pieced together the remains.



WE HAVE THE position covered. The plans for ambush are proceeding apace.' Champion Dalloc flexed his power claw, admiring the way the energy crackled and sizzled from his fingertips.

'Sir, we have motion in the undergrowth.' The squad raised their bolters.

'Assume fire pattern omega,' stated Dalloc calmly. 'Expect indigenous predators.' He never glanced at his men, thousands of years of training made their drill flawless.

'Sir, nothing in the north quadr...'

Something moved toward Dalloc, a blur of speed, fast enough that even his enhanced vision couldn't lock on it.

'Fire at will!' commanded Dalloc. In an instant, the jungle exploded with bolter fire. As the sound of the guns died, inhumanly strong claws tore apart the champion's helmet and fangs ripped off the front of his face.

The jungle cried out with growls and the sound of splintering metal. Dalloc's power claw lay on the ground, quiet and lifeless.



THE WOLF PRIEST carefully picked up the power claw. Claw marks completely covered the armour which lay nearby. His sharp eyes picked up a strand of fur across the metal. He carefully picked it up, twisting it in his fingers. Thokar knew the scent. The hair was that of a Fenrisian wolf and yet, something wasn't right. There was a vaguely human scent mixed in as well. Strange, it reminded him of...

The wolf priest quickly activated his comm. 'Defender of Russ, a Space Wolf has succumbed to the curse of our gene-seed. All of my Wolves are present. Are any men missing, especially from the ranks of the Blood Claws or Wolf Guard?'

'Wolf Priest Thokar, we have no reports of anyone succumbing to the gene-seed. There are no Wulfen in your area. Are you certain of your findings?'

'Not entirely. I will report back when I know more.'

Thokar signaled his men to move forward. They spread out, vanishing from sight. Only the wolf priest's acute senses told him that the Grey Hunters maintained their formation.

As Thokar pushed his way through the jungle, the hairs on his neck rose. The smell of rot assailed him, overcoming the other smells of the planet.

'We've found the remains of a vehicle,' came a call over the vox.

A fallen Chaos dreadnought lay in a charred section of jungle, surrounded by dozens of small fires, as if part of a foul ritual. The sarcophagus was missing, the metal edges around it thin and flaking. Thokar knew a melta weapon at close range had vaporized the metal.

The wolf priest knelt down beside the remnants of the infernal machine. The hairs on the back of his neck remained standing as he examined the blasphemous runes etched across the dreadnought's metal surface. Small gargoyles, spikes and plated skulls hung from the fallen giant. He muttered a quick prayer to Russ. A single precise hit had destroyed the Dreadnought. Only the Emperor's finest, the Space Marines were so accurate. There were no Space Marines, assigned here... and a lone Wulfen couldn't have done this. This attack was recent, happening within moments of the first attack they had discovered.

'A highly coordinated assault... even through this jungle. So fast that even these Chaos Marines were caught unprepared,' observed the wolf priest. The colours of the enemy were unmistakable. Though little could be certain about Chaos, the wolf priest knew his ancient lore. Before their fall, the Iron Warriors were master tacticians. Of all Space Marine Chapters from ancient times, the Iron Warriors had been unsurpassed in siege warfare. Now, ten thousand years later, after giving themselves to the powers of Chaos, no one knew the limits of their abilities. Yet,

Thokar noted, someone had caught the enemy off guard.

Drawing on his decades of experience, Thokar paced over to the spot from which the melta shot should have come. The boot prints he found were unmistakable... power armour, a few different types, from different eras. They could be traitor Marines. Yet their scents reminded him of Fenris. However they had arrived, the Iron Warriors' attackers had left no trail. They had used teleporters. Space Wolves did not teleport, they had a healthy mistrust of such technology. Still, the scents of Fenris were unmistakable to Thokar. Space Wolves had been here.

Bolter shells illustrated where the Iron Warriors had returned fire against their attackers. Crushed plants indicated that some of their number fell during the initial attack, only to have bodies removed later. The wolf priest found an unusual shell, larger than the others. It was an autocannon round fired from another direction.

'Thokar, come see this,' Wulfric gestured. As Thokar strode through the undergrowth, he noted with approval that the Grey Hunters stayed watchful, instinctively creating a perimeter.

The remains of a massive Chaos war engine lay burned and crumpled in the creeper vines. At first, Thokar mistook the machine for another Dreadnought. Although it was obviously a walker, the infernal device had six legs and a turret mounted atop them, more akin to a tank. The scent of sulphur, and a sickly smell of decay mixed with the acrid aromas of spent shells and oil, hung around it.

'What in the frozen hells is it?' asked Wulfric.

The wolf priest raised a hand. An autocannon hung off the shattered turret. Even more impressively, the main gun appeared to be a battlecannon. Thokar had heard reports of such creations. This was a construct of daemons. The rear armour of the turret showed signs of plasma blasts. Precise hits, obviously from close range. Yet these blasts weren't precise enough to destroy the war engine. A single strike, possibly from a power fist, had shattered the heart of the machine. The faintest scent

of blood and... wolves came from the power claws found at the end of each of the Chaos machine's legs. Thokar noted the faintest flakes of grey ceramite on two of the claws, a slightly darker shade than his Wolves wore. The paint could have come from any of a number of Space Marine Chapters, but this colour meant something to Thokar.

'Space Wolves used to wear this colour,' whispered the wolf priest. 'Ten thousand years ago.'

Thokar felt his heart rate increase as the words left his mouth. He strode around the war machine, and then he found bootprints. No prints came or went, although autocannon shells and bolter rounds lay all around. He saw the impression of a power armour clad body in the soft earth, but there was no body. There had been two. One had fallen, but, it was as if both had vanished.

The thought that two men would have attempted to take on a tank-sized monstrosity like this one spoke of men pushing the limits of courage. What was more, the blast strikes suggested that they knew where to shoot the strange vehicle. They must have fought such things before.

Thokar felt a sense of religious awe flow through him. By Russ! How could he have ever guessed? If what he was seeing was true, there was only one explanation. The lost 13th Company had survived over ten thousand years in the Eye of Terror. What could sustain even the Emperor's finest for ten thousand years in pure Chaos, surrounded by enemies?

Thokar looked around at the Grey Hunters he could see, and scented the ones he could not. He felt the determination and the focus in each one. The wolf priest also felt the Wulfen growl deep within his own soul. It would not let him die or fail. What if the entire Chapter had given themselves to the Wulfen?

Icy sweat broke out on Thokar's brow. What sort of foe had the Iron Warriors faced?

Thokar nodded to his Wolf Guard. It was time to find the objective. Wilderness Outpost Delta was their mission, although it paled in comparison to what the wolf

priest had discovered. If it were true... Thokar shuddered inwardly, unsure whether to feel elation or fear. He had personally killed recruits on Fenris, lost to the Wulfen. Only the strongest Space Wolves, Wolf Guard or older could survive attaining the Mark of the Wulfen.

'More bodies, sir. We're very close,' came Wulfrik's voice.

Thokar saw the blood drenched, torn remains. These were the ones he had seen evidence of earlier, the ones who had been near the dreadnought. He recognised the scents. They had fallen back into an ambush.

'Let me see...' Thokar knelt over the remains.

The attack had been different this time. Although the carnage was substantial, the claw and teeth marks were absent. This time, more conventional weapons had been brought to bear: power weapons, a power fist and something else. He carefully examined the cuts in the power armour. He could have identified an axe slash even before he had donned the mantle of Blood Claw, and the weapon had cleanly cut the armour, leaving the edges ice-cold. Only a Frostaxe, a sacred weapon of the Space Wolves, left these marks. The sacred weapon had struck with wild abandon in a frenzy, a definite sign of the Wulfen.

'Sir,' said the Wolf Guard. 'There is no sign of the body of a champion. We are almost at the objective.'

'Indeed. Move on,' ordered Thokar, already piecing together what happened. He had a vision in his mind of what must have occurred, shortly before their arrival.



CHAMPION KURNOS ordered the retreat. Adaric's squad was not responding. These weren't ordinary Space Wolves. There was only one explanation: the 13th Company, the Space Wolves who had followed them into the Eye of Terror itself.

Suddenly, the air shimmered around his squad. A Rune Priest appeared before them, accompanied by a squad, clad in bits of power

armour from a dozen Chaos Chapters. Before Kurnos could shout orders, his attackers launched a savage assault. The Rune Priest fought with unmatched fury. Kurnos felt strangely detached as claws severed his right arm. He closed his eyes and waited for death.

Death never came. Instead, strong hands wrestled his helm off and jerked back his head. A pair of bright, yellow eyes stared down. They were not the eyes of a man, but the eyes of a wolf.

'Tell us, Iron Warrior, will your commanders come for you?' growled the Marine. 'Call them.' Kurnos heard the hum of the power weapon as it sectioned off his knees. The attackers dragged him across the ground, writhing in agony.

'Iron within, iron...' Kurnos started the mantra of his Legion.

'This is your emergency beacon. Live long enough to signal them, not to speak,' growled his attacker. Razor claws sliced apart his tongue. Dimly aware of his shock, Kurnos realised that he lay on the floor in the outpost. The 13th Company had set an ambush. He was bait. As Kurnos heard his emergency beacon go off, the iron within him turned to rust.



INCOMPLETE TRENCHES, half-used razor wire, unassembled gun emplacements and bodies of Iron Warriors littered the area around Wilderness Outpost Delta. The wolf scent was strong here. This was the site of a Wulfen attack.

'Seize the objective,' ordered Thokar in a tone that brooked nothing but obedience.

'There are slain Iron Warrior Terminators scattered inside,' called Uller, one of Pack Morkai's Grey Hunters. The wolf priest was prepared for the carnage.

The exterior of Wilderness Outpost Delta was standard rockcrete, covered in camo netting to hide the communications array. Thokar had seen the same building on half a hundred worlds. Inside lay the corpses of five Iron Warriors in Terminator armour, and a sixth in power armour. Wulfrik led Pack Morkai back outside, while Pack Ranulf stayed with Thokar. Blood splatter decorated the

interior of the room. Thokar knelt over one of the dead Terminators. The wiring attaching the corpse's backup power supply sparked.

'Something over here, sir,' said Bran. 'Looks like part of a skull.'

Thokar nodded to the Grey Hunter. This was the end of the story as he had seen it.



THE AIR SHIMMERED as five of the Warsmith's Chosen materialised from the warp inside Wilderness Outpost Delta. The Terminators dwarfed other Space Marines. Their armour was the most ancient and ensorcelled of their Chapter. They had no equals, and only bent their knees to the Warsmith himself. They looked down on Kurnos' twitching form. He saw daemonic faces leering at him from within the glossy dark metal of their armour.

Kurnos struggled to warn the Chosen, but it was too late. The Wolves were inside, power fists smashing against the Terminators. A chill ran through Kurnos as the Frostaxe stole the heat from the room, then sliced open the sacred Terminator armour, as easily as it cut the flesh within. The Chosen of Chaos, the Warsmith's Terminators, were no more.

'A transport has landed,' said one of the Marines.

'You've earned this,' another of the bestial Marines growled to Kurnos.

Kurnos looked up and the claws took off the top of his head.



WULFRIC AND PACK MORKAI reacted as one. Somewhere high above the range of human hearing, they each heard a familiar sound, a sound that they had heard a thousand times before, on a hundred different worlds. In every case, on every world, it came with the same deadly result.

'Incoming ordnance!' howled Wulfrik over the comm.

The wolf priest and Pack Ranulf disappeared in smoke, fire and debris as the first of the artillery rounds impacted dead centre on the Outpost. A geyser of dirt, rock, concrete and ceramite armour fragments erupted as the second round hit home. Ancient power armour failed to save two members of Pack Morkai as their remains rained down on their brothers. Shells struck all around them.

Wulfrik triggered his comm. 'Thokar... Thokar... please respond...'

Static answered the Wolf Guard. Wulfrik's anger built in his heart. His wolf priest should not die on this backwater world. He howled in rage.

Wulfrik heard movement behind him. He spun, drawing his power sword. Thokar stood over him, dirt smeared across his black armour.

'Wulfrik, we have work to do. Control yourself until we can get to grips with them,' Thokar said with a half grin.

Wulfrik took the moment to control his own inner beast. Relief replaced rage on his face. 'Russ be praised! I thought we'd lost you!'

The wolf priest spoke reassuringly. 'It will take more than Iron Warrior artillery to kill me.'

'Uller, establish a flanking position to the east. Keep Pack Morkai in the cover of the jungle, at the clearing's edge. Wulfrik, stay with me. They will come upwind from the north,' ordered the wolf priest. 'Wulfrik, we're the bait.'

The surviving Space Wolves took up positions among their fallen in the ruins of the Wilderness Outpost, making good use of the rockcrete as cover. They waited. The jungle fell silent.

Thokar mentally reviewed his plan. Iron Warriors bombarded their enemies to soften them before an assault. When the Chaos Marines broke cover, they would open fire. In that instant, Uller and Pack Morkai would return fire from the jungle, giving Thokar, Wulfrik and the survivors of Pack Ranulf the opportunity to seize the initiative and take the fight to them.

A skirmish line of iron behemoths broke from the thick jungle. Stepping into the midday sun, they wore armour from a different time and place, holy relics from ten thousand years past, now polluted with Chaos symbols and unholy markings. It sickened Thokar that these gifts of the Emperor were now bastardised tools of Chaos.

Boltgun rounds exploded around Thokar and the Wolf Guard. The few surviving chunks of Wilderness Outpost Delta blew apart, sandblasting the Space Wolves hiding in cover. Brother Sven looked up, only to catch a bolter round in his helmet. Thokar cursed the young and bold.

Pack Morkai opened fire from the jungle. The Iron Warriors paused for a fraction of a moment, confused by the attack from an unexpected quarter. That fraction of a moment was enough of a signal for the Space Wolves to charge from the ruin.

Raising his plasma pistol, Thokar exploded from behind his cover. 'For Russ!' he shouted. Each Space Wolf in turn added their own battle-cry to Thokar's until 'For Russ' resounded above the bolter shots.

The Wolves tore into the Iron Warriors like predators on prey. Pack Morkai swiftly joined their brothers. Throughout the vastness of space, few could match the fury of a Space Wolf assault. Today, the Iron Warriors would learn this lesson. The Wolves asked no quarter and offered none. Bolt pistol rounds met ceramite and chainswords bit deep, first into armour and then into corrupted flesh. The Iron Warriors fell in droves.

Thokar briefly paused as the torn corpse of an Iron Warrior slipped from the grasp of his power fist. 'Regroup and prepare to move....' Thokar started, then realised that something was distinctly wrong.

'Russ protect us!' shouted Wulfrik beside him.

Thokar knew the unmistakable scent. Whenever the Iron Priests evoked the Holy Litanies of the Machine God, they anointed their great machines with oil. Trees crashed into the clearing from the south as twin abominations charged. The Iron Warriors had flanked them!

Thokar had underestimated his foes, perhaps lulled into false security by the

carnage they had encountered earlier. The Chaos Dreadnaughts roared with madness as they lumbered toward the Space Wolves. Two squads of Iron Warriors followed, spraying bolter fire as they advanced.

'Pull back. Use the cover of the jungle,' Thokar ordered. The wolf priest hoped that the thick foliage might neutralise the Iron Warrior's numbers and superior firepower.

A small ball of energy cut off the withdrawal, appearing in front of the treeline. The energy pulsed once, then expanded into a sphere several feet in diameter. Lightning swirled across the sphere's surface, then the sphere vanished with a thunderclap. Iron Warrior Terminators stood in place of the energy. As the Space Wolves paused, twin bolters and reaper autocannons sent the souls of three members of Pack Morkai to their ancestors. The Iron Warriors had them surrounded.

One of the Terminators raised a hand and the firing stopped. His armour was far more ornate than the others, decorated with longer spikes holding many skulls and the helms of a dozen Chapters of Space Marines, including the Space Wolves. Faces twisted across the surfaces of his metal armour, like trapped souls trying to escape.

'What do we have here? Pups of Leman Russ, pet dog of the False Emperor!' the warsmith spat the words like venom. 'You have a choice: renounce your failed Emperor or beg for a swift death!'

Before Thokar could retort, howls echoed from all around, faintly at first, then growing rapidly in volume and intensity. The warsmith paused and turned his head, trying to locate the source of the sounds.

'Thokar, behind us!' Wulfrik warned.

Thokar glanced back at the Iron Warriors and their ancient war machines. Behind the forces of Chaos, the landscape distorted as a vortex of energy formed, flinging bolts of lightning in all directions. Shadowy figures materialised.

Immediately, one Chaos Dreadnaught collapsed. A pack with the markings of Long Fangs, the most experienced Space Wolves, poured nuclear fire into the remaining Dreadnaught from meltaguns. The war machine exploded, engulfing

several Iron Warriors in a blossom of destruction.

Thokar seized the moment. 'Pack Morkai, aid our reinforcements. Wulfrik, everyone else, take the Terminators. The warsmith is mine!' shouted Thokar. The Space Wolves attacked.

Even as Thokar swung his power fist into a Terminator, new combatants joined the assault. A snarling mass of fangs and teeth leapt upon the enemy. The primal fury of the Wulfen amazed even the veteran wolf priest. His new allies were more beast than Marine, clad only in remnants of power armour. A few held weapons, but these were secondary to claws and teeth as they gouged out crimson chunks from beneath the pewter and gold Chaos Marines.

Distracted for a second, Thokar barely evaded an attack. It was the warsmith. Thokar cursed as a second blow caught him squarely in the chest, throwing him backward into a crater left from the bombardment. Pain seared through Thokar's ribs. The warsmith loomed over the wolf priest, glaring down at him from the crater's edge. Thokar slowly rose to his feet, growling with defiance as energy rippled from his power fist.

'Your time is over, Wolf!' declared the warsmith.

'Your pitiful existence is all that will end today, betrayer!' responded the wolf priest.

The ancient warriors collided. Thokar, filled with rage, deflected or dodged every one of the warsmith's attacks. The power fist was an ancient weapon, slow and cumbersome to wield. In lesser hands, that would have been a liability. Thokar used its weight to his advantage, holding back, luring the warsmith closer. The master of the Iron Warriors swung his power sword in a killing blow, overcome with confidence. Only as his weight shifted into the swing did he realise that Thokar had feinted, tricking him into overextending his attack. The wolf priest had an opening. His power fist only needed one. The warsmith's helmet exploded under the impact, and broken spikes rained helmets and skulls all around him. Victory belonged to the wolf priest.

INFERNO!

Searing pain flooded through Thokar's left arm. Instinctively, Thokar ducked and twisted to his right and brought his power fist around. With a sickening crack, a Wulfen's chest splattered.

The 13th Company survivors surrounded the remaining Space Wolves. There was no question in Thokar's mind as to the fate of the 13th Great Company. Their time in the Eye of Terror had unleashed the beast within. The wolf priest saw no remaining humanity in their feral yellow eyes. The Space Wolves hesitantly leveled their weapons at the Wulfen. Each one had reached same conclusion. They faced fellow Sons of Russ. They didn't want to fire on their own, some even lowered their weapons, apparently choosing destruction over betraying their lost brothers.

'Hold, my brothers!' The command came in ancient Fenrisian.

Instantly, the Wulfen submitted and withdrew to the edge of the clearing. A grizzled ancient figure, tall even by Space Wolf standards, with a snow-white beard hanging from a cracked, weathered face stood at the tree line. The figure wore black armour from a time before the Great Betrayal, from the Time of Russ. He was a wolf priest.

The Wulfen disappeared into the jungle. When the last one had gone, the old priest slowly turned to face the Space Wolves

'Lord priest...' Thokar began. If there were any words beyond that they were lost to him.

With a last glance to Thokar and a slight smile, the wolf priest disappeared as well. The silence within the clearing was deafening.



THOKAR'S COMM crackled. 'Commissar Thaddeus Palentine at your service, lord Chaplain. We are your relief. Is the area secure for our landing?'

'This is Thokar, wolf priest of Russ,' stated Thokar, efficiently introducing himself and correcting the commissar simultaneously.

'I'm afraid we missed all the fun. Our intelligence indicates that you were horribly outnumbered,' observed the commissar.

'Russ was with us today,' offered Thokar.

'We've had scattered reports of bestial creatures wearing fragments of Space Marine power armour. We were hoping that maybe you and your men could shed some light on these matters,' said Commissar Palentine.

'Have you ever battled Chaos? They are all mindless beasts wearing power armour,' Thokar spat. 'We have Khorne Berzerkers in the area, frenzied, skull-rending killers. This area isn't safe for your men. We'll handle things. Go where you are needed. The Space Wolves will handle it from here.'

'I see...' replied the commissar. 'Very well.' The comm signal died.

'Not that I would ever challenge you, wolf priest, but I'm not sure I understand what you said to the commissar,' Wulfric stated.

Thokar sighed. 'I lied, Wulfric. Our brothers have returned after centuries of existence within the Eye. You saw them. They can never return to Fenris. The Great Wolf can never welcome them back. However, we can ensure that they do not become hunted, hunted by those who they set out to defend ten thousand years ago. So, I gave the commissar what he was looking for: an answer.'

As the wolf priest and Wolf Guard walked back toward the ruins of the Outpost, the ancient yellow eyes of a predator tracked them. ♦

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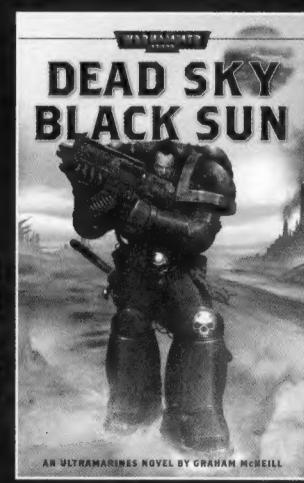
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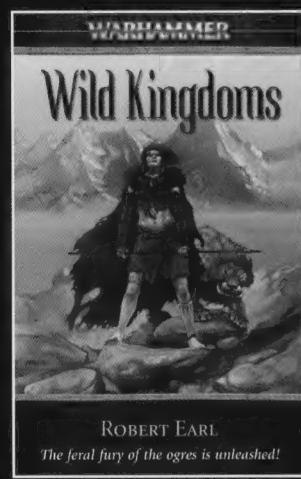
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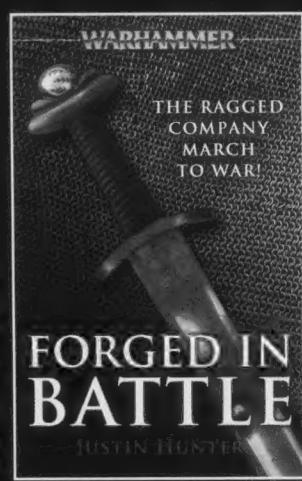
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